BROWNING FOR BEGINNERS

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To My Wife

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Browning for Beginners.

I.

PROEM.

WHEN some years ago I began to read Browning I took pencil notes of certain things as I went along. The habit then formed has been continued, and it is from notes thus accumulated that this small volume has been formed. My great object in reading was to arrive at the meaning, the thought, which always is and must be the chief thing in literature. The style is not unimportant, but it is secondary to the thought, and in fact grows out of it, is determined by it. Thought and the expression of it are psychologically, organically related; as even our bodies are the expression of our souls.

I have not attempted literary criticism in the ordinary way of that art, for which I possess no qualifications. My object has been to get face to

face with a mind, the mind of Browning, to make its acquaintance, to discover its ideas, and to judge for myself whether, and how far these were true—or shadowed truth. It was to help me in the ordering of my life that I read in the first place, not that I might produce a book; my purpose was not literary but practical. Browning has been already treated by several literary persons, and perhaps little new from the literary standpoint can be said about him. It is not a standpoint from which we can get a profound, a satisfying view. The following pages tell how he affected a reader of average intelligence, who studied him leisurely, amid other avocations, and as opportunity allowed. That is all they profess to do, or attempt. I have aimed to be general in my statements—to present both the man and his work in broad outline; feeling that they who become interested can fill in the picture for themselves. What sort of people did Browning spring from? how was he brought up? where did he live? what type of mind had he? what class of subjects interested him? what was his final attitude towards life? how did he feel about religion—the eternal problem with the eternal fascination? and, as naturally following, was he optimistically or pessimistically inclined?—upon such general questions I have tried to throw light.

I was prepared for a good deal of obscurity, but not so much as at first I appeared to encounter. I got on no quicker with "Sordello" than I had got on with Aschylus in my second winter at the university;

yet "Sordello" was its author's favourite literary child. Something in him possibly told him that this bantling needed friends; as John Bunyan was moved towards his blind child above all his others:

"Especially my poor blind child, who lay nearer my heart than all I had besides. Poor child, thought I, what sorrow art thou like to have for thy portion in this world! Thou must be beaten, suffer hunger cold, nakedness, and a thousand calamities, though I cannot now endure the wind should blow on thee."

This is the human heart. How often has it been so! How very often has the black sheep of the flock been the mother's pet lamb! But the world in its preferences does not often follow the lead of the fond parent. Accordingly "Sordello" has been neglected by the world; worse, has been vilified, condemned, "cast into the limbo of abortive creations," to use a phrase of Mr. Gladstone's. Deservedly, I do think, upon the whole. Determined to do it well, as nobody had ever done it before, Browning has overdone it, and done it to death; has so condensed himself that he has choked himself,— and his readers too for that matter. Let no one begin his Browning studies with "Sordello." He who does so is like the general who attacks the citadel before he has stormed the out-works.

When we approach this writer for the first time we must go cautiously, feeling our way, as we go down a shelving beach into the sea. Browning has a few short poems that are, by comparison with his others,

simple; such as "Andrea Del Sarto," "Evelyn Hope," "A Grammarian's Funeral"; the last named of which has marching music to carry any reader along. And he has long ones that even to a beginner are not insurmountable, that a wakeful intelligence with its loins girt up should master without difficulty. Perhaps not master; for Browning's thoughts are endlessly suggestive, opening far vistas, but should read with some perception of their meaning at least. On a second perusal he will see more meaning; on a third more still; and if he go on he will discover that he has lighted upon a true mine, where there is ample gold to repay the labour of crushing it from the quartz. "Paracelsus," as fine a poem as Browning ever wrote, is of this character, and the young resolute reader need not be long before he engages it.

There attaches to Browning the great interest that always attaches to the man who takes life seriously; and who takes himself seriously, as one sent here with talents which he has been strictly commanded to use.

Not only by his choice of subjects but by his manner of treating them Browning sometimes tempts us to regard him as a dilettante. But he is not really so. He is too much in earnest for a dilettante. The one subject that he loved above all others, and that he never wearied of was the soul. Art itself interested him only as it manifested some mood or manner of the soul. This being the case we perceive how he became involved with the problems of religion. A mind

like his, with such tastes, comes across such problems necessarily, as it peregrinates through the kingdom of thought. They bar its path and it cannot escape from them. It must wrestle with them, and if it cannot solve them must come to some understanding with them, strike a treaty with them, before it can go forward. As a victorious general, to make himself safe, must storm every fortress of the enemy on the line of his march ; if he leave one his communications may be broken and his army endangered.

It is in this way that so much of what Browning has written bears, mediately or immediately, on religion. The subject was as much in his mind as if he had been a professional theologian, and more than it is in the minds of many theologians. And he was more competent to deal with it than many such : first by reason of his intellectual vigour ; and second by reason of this vigour being master of itself, not in bonds, breathing the air of liberty, inquiring and meditating at its will, and pronouncing at its will, openly and without fear.

Such was Browning. And such at certain periods of religious-history is the best recommendation he could get. I know not whether the present is such a period, but possibly it is. Knowing ones say that it is. Men's hearts are failing them for fear, they say, because belief has broken down ; and because there is no where in the heavens, not so much as the size of a man's hand, the gathering signs of a new belief. It may be so. Such a state of things has been seen

before; such a state of things will be seen again; such a state of things may exist now. I can imagine such a state. From time to time the tree of faith springs up and flourishes, affording shelter from the storm and shadow from the heat; but from time to time it also dies; and between the death of the old tree and the birth of the new it is a woe-begone world. They who live then are as wanderers in the desert, with no wells to drink from. And how some of them do thirst! There is nothing in all the world—of goods or gear, or name or fame, or place or power—that they would not exchange for a drop of the living water. Knowledge itself sticks in their throat, chokes them, without this drop. Man born of woman! to such straits is he driven; and chiefly by himself, his innate nobility, his aspirations and his hopes. The teacher who speaks a vital word to him in this state, a word thrown up from soul depths, is a true saviour.

There be those who say that Browning is such a teacher. And they are right to this extent, he speaks as he saw and felt, not as other people reported to him. Therefore he speaks with freshness and power, that power which Nature gives to the man of genius above all her children. His utterances upon religion are in a manner his confessions; of the same class of literature as the "Confessions" of Augustine, and the "Thoughts" of Marcus Aurelius, and the "Apologia" of Newman.

With all this Browning is little of a consoler: he

rather helps us to keep well than medicines us when we are sick. He has none of those sweet mystic lyrics that are so potent to heal bruised hearts, because they have come from a heart that itself has been bruised ; which Browning's never was that I know of. He is always subject to the limits that circumscribe the strong.

> "Who never ate his bread in sorrow,
> Who never spent the darksome hours
> Weeping and watching for the morrow,
> He knows ye not, ye holy Powers." *

This reminds me that Browning's poems lack generally what may be called the emphasis of the heart ; which more than any other single quality gives permanence to literature. They are "brain spun" products, strong and brilliant, not warm jets, flesh and blood things, thrown up from the fountains of feeling. As to such flesh and blood things, Browning could not give what he did not himself possess. This does not imply that he was a man of no heart ; but only that as between his heart and his intellect the latter held supremacy. It was with it he worked and achieved his successes far more than with the other. His interest in a subject is always in the main intellectual.

Russell Lowell in his poem upon Agassiz, the American naturalist, says,

* This is Carlyle's version, with the word holy in the last line substituted for the word 'gloomy'? which is not only an inaccurate translation, but misrepresents the sense.

"His magic was not far to seek,—
He was so human!"

We understand what that means, it is a declaration of the power—mystic, unfathomable, invincible—that resides in the human; in those underlying, primal elements that make us men; without which we cannot be men,—angels perhaps, brutes perhaps, but not men.

After our declaration of Browing's great interest in the soul it would hardly do to say that unlike Agassiz he was not human. But he was not human in the same way, not in the way ordinarily understood by that term. His method of studying the soul would of itself prove this. He studied it analytically, as the physicist studies a gas or a liquid, and as the botanist studies a flower; he cut, and probed, and took to pieces, like the anatomist with a scalpel in his hand. This is a circumstance much dwelt upon by his admirers, as evidencing his subtle power, by which he brought the dark things of the soul out of their dark recesses. Did he my masters? I think not. Never to the psychological analyst will the soul yield up its deep secrets. Made as he was Browning could not help being such; but it was no feather in his cap as a poet, he was a poet in spite of it.

Analysis implies a deliberateness, a coldness, a mechanical mode of procedure which is inconsistent with inspiration, that hall-mark of genius. When we love an object with our hearts, when the beauty and mystery of it carry us away, we do not think

of it as having parts, we think of it as a whole, something living and indivisible, whose charm much handling destroys, as it destroys the peach's bloom.

Another circumstance in which Browning's comparative lack of the human shows itself is his choice of subjects. They are as a rule not commonplace, and often not contemporary ; they are things brought out of the past, and they do not illustrate the every day life and the every day emotions of man. In his novel "The Wrecker," Louis Stevenson says—and it is one of the best things he ever said—that, "The eternal life of man is spent in sun and rain, and in rude physical effort, and lies upon one side scarce changed from the beginning." He declares, in accordance with this view, that, "Those who dwell in clubs and studios may paint excellent pictures, and write enchanting novels. There is one thing that they should not do, they should pass no judgment on man's destiny, for it is a thing with which they are unacquainted."

Quite true. Man is first of all an animal, seeking food and shelter from the earth like the other animals around him. But he differs from these in one marked respect, which is the key to his progress, he possesses the faculty of invention. By this faculty he adds to the productiveness of the earth, and becomes his own Providence or Divinity, rendering himself ever more independent of Nature's caprices, drought or flood, storm or conflagration. But for his mechanical contrivance he would have been a savage still, nature's

bond slave, eating hard, lying hard, and with no "speculation in his eyes." It is a good discipline for us to be made aware of this, even although it should take from us something of our pride. When we think of the activities that have advanced us we are apt to think of the religious and philosophical ones. But the careful study of man's history shows that these rather follow than lead; and in any case they are always dependent upon the economical conditions. Man had to be a hard-headed, hard-handed mechanic, working out the salvation of his body, before he could be much of a philosopher. And this circumstance throws a halo round the lowly occupations of life, raising them almost to a level with the highest. They are parts of the same process as the highest; and they and the highest are as essentially, organically connected as the branches of the same tree are. The river of life—of man's social and moral life—is great, is immense, but all its waters are one.

St. Paul had a glimpse of this truth when he wrote that, "Those members of the body which seem to be more feeble are necessary."

And all—every thread, every pattern, every shade of colour in the web of our complex civilization—has sprung out of our necessities. They are the original propelling force, the *vis a tergo,* that drove us forward. "Necessity is the mother of invention," says the proverb, and there, in a nut-shell, is the philosophy of our life. Had man never been hungry he had never

bent his back in toil. After his bodily hunger was satisfied had he not felt "the wolfish hunger of knowledge" he had never produced the higher sciences. Had he not felt at times life's flatness and staleness he had never gone after beauty, never created art. And had sorrow never wrung his heart where would have been his religion—that eternal world with eternal life and love in it, which he has not only fancied but believed in, and which he has placed somewhere beyond the stars? Man's necessities, his troubles, have been the making of him.

So far the so-called material activities of life, the industries and the useful arts, occupy the largest space, engrossing three-fourths of his energy and time. This, I opine, is what Stevenson was thinking of when he wrote, "The eternal life of man is spent in sun and rain and in rude physical effort." And when he added that the habitué of clubs and studios knows nothing about it, Browning knew nothing about it, had no sympathy with it, and has hardly, if at all, touched it with his genius; which is why I have said he is lacking in the human. He is too much of the club and the studio to be greatly human; as Socrates, who lived on the street, was in the ancient world, and as Walt Whitman, who also lived on the street, was in the modern. Browning lived with books and pictures, and with educated, fashionable people, who were too like himself to have taught him much. His head may have grown fuller from their society, but I doubt if his heart grew larger. For rightly developing us, for

instructing us, for broadening and softening us, the smart talk of the salon is far behind the vast murmur of humanity, like a sea's.

When we reflect on these things we see a new cause for Browning's unpopularity, he hardly touched the life around him at all. This was the life that "the common people" who were his contemporaries knew best, and in which they felt most interest; and not finding it treated in his books they did not read these. But the serious minded student, the man who takes an interest in his fellow man, not as he appears in one age only, but as he appears in all ages, will find in Browning a well of life; to which he may come, and come again, and come as often as he likes, and always get refreshed.

I have sometimes thought that a day may come, after "the mild light of science" has shone upon us a little longer, when Browning—as well as other men of letters—will be taken to the pulpit. This would surely do something for the pew; and it would make the pulpit a place where an educated man, a man of knowledge and meditation, could stand unembarrassed and self-respecting; where he could do something for his people and something for himself, the higher life in him not being arrested. Browning is full of passages, single lines even, that would form the most admirable texts; none of them the statement of a dogma, but all of them breathing a great sentiment, something serious, wise, ideal.

As the business agent spreads out samples of wares

to his customers, so shall I here give some samples of these epigrammatic passages. They possess that which is always the best quality in a text, suggestiveness. They stimulate the mind to thought almost against itself; and would if they were adopted bring new energy to worn out preachers—minds jaded before their time by an eternal sameness, like a one-eyed horse that circles in a mill. I give a few such passages that have struck me, but which are not on that account necessarily the best.

> "Men have oft grown old among their books
> To die case hardened in their ignorance."

This was said by a man, Paracelsus, who in the course of his development gained a contempt for books. Instead of teaching him they mistaught him, he discovered, so that he turned away from them to Nature and fact. He read, but he remained as ignorant as before; worse than before, with artificial ideas, errors, in his mind which were not there to begin with. In this case it was the fault of the books; which were only fit for the fire, he thought, and to the fire he consigned them. "There are no books as yet," says Richard Jefferies; "they have got to be written." And it is partly true. But it is not always the fault of the books. Often it is the fault of the reader; whose mind is a machine rather than an organism, with no alchemy to transmute what it does read into newness of life; with a gift of mechanical acquisition, but none of assimilation. It pores over books for a life time, and for result it has a rubbish-

heap of facts, as dry and dead as a cinder-heap, an encumbering mass.

> "The polisher needs precious stone no less
> Than precious stone needs polisher."

So the book needs the mind no less than the mind the book.

> "Respect all such as sing when all alone!"

Yes, for they are choice souls these, the select of the earth. They have attained to the state of inner harmony, peace with themselves, and peace with the world; of which state music—the soft trill that comes unasked—is the natural expression. It is the state beyond all others in life, the blessed state, which God keeps for them who are believing, simple-minded and pure. This, I think, is something like what Browning meant:

> "You fell, but have not refused
> To rise, because an angel worsted you,
> In wrestling. . . . .
> . . . . . .
>
> Still you pursue
> The ungracious path as though 'twere rosy strewn."

This touches upon a subject that was often in Browning's mind, and very personal to him, failure. He had a long experience of it; so that he was led to look at it from all sides, and in his need to frame for himself a philosophy of it. Allusions to it are all over his works. And the burden of what he says is, that the true man cannot fail, and in point of fact does not

fail, his reverses of fortune being only apparent. Whatever happens he keeps his equanimity; believes still, hopes still, remains sweet at the centre; so, turns his seeming great failures into great successes, rising on them as "on stepping stones to higher things." If you say there is no heroism in this you simply prove yourself one who does not know, who is ignorant of the temptations failure brings with it; temptations to give up the game, to become regardless, sour, hard, a pessimist, "sitting by the poisoned springs of life, waiting for the morrow to free us from the strife." To fail nobly, to keep our heart in failure, needs a larger capital of manhood to draw upon than to succeed.

Here is a fine antithesis:

"So, all that the old Dukes had been without knowing it,
This Duke would fain know he was without being it."

The difference between the counterfeit man and the genuine one could not be more tersely expressed:

"Measure your mind's height by the shade it casts."

A piece of consolation, this, for the gifted in their loneliness and despondency, when black thoughts visit them, as being who they are black thoughts must.

There are two lines which Tennyson grudged to Browning, as Carlyle grudged a passage in Wilhelm Meister to Goethe; he admired them so much that he would have given the world to have written them himself. They are these:

> "Oh, the little more, and how much it is!
> And the little less, and what worlds away!"

You will admit that Tennyson showed good taste, was a judge, will you not?

Here is a sentiment so beautifully chivalrous, so animate with the truth-loving spirit that it ought not to be forgotten. It shows a noble carelessness about who does the great deed so the great deed be done:

> "Let our God's praise
> Go bravely through the world at last! What care
> Through me or thee?"

Take this also:

> "Soul too weak forsooth
> To cope with fact—wants fiction everywhere."

Lines that suggest no end of questions. For instance, is it the glory of soul to be too weak to cope with fact, *i.e.*, is idealism the ultimate truth of things? Or is it the shame of soul to want fiction everywhere, *i.e.*, is realism the ultimate truth of things? And so on.

Brevity is the soul of wit, they say, and could a grand truth be more epigrammatically uttered than thus:

> "That stoop of the soul which in bending upraises it too."

And here is something of the very essence of Christianity, such as is said every week in our pulpits, but not said so well:

"When the fight begins within himself,
A man's worth something. God stoops o'er his head,
Satan looks up between his feet—both tug—
He's left i' the middle : the soul wakes
And grows."

It is a perception of Darwin's law of the struggle for existence—that eternal, omnipresent law—at work even in the soul. Without struggle there is no progress anywhere, either for spirit or for flesh. In the higher sphere as in the lower, man gets what he labours and suffers for only. In a far deeper sense than we wot of we are all self-made. And in another passage Browning tells us that we are never done with the job; one struggle succeeds another, and there is no end :

"So triumph ever shall renew itself;
Ever shall end in efforts higher yet,
Ever begin."

Again :

"Knowledge and power have rights,
But ignorance and weakness have rights too."

Doubtless it is true, since a man of genius, a poet has said so; but sometimes the rights of the weak in this world are a little hard to discover. Here is the best of all possible advices to a painter, provided he is able to understand it; but it need not be given to a novice. I leave it without comment.

"Paint the soul, never mind the legs and arms."

Humour is a rare quality in Browning, but here it is for certain ; and grim too, which adds to its piquancy :

"Patrizi, zealous soul,"

(He was the officer who took the runaway lovers in "The Ring and the Book")

"Who having but duty to sustain weak flesh,
Got heated, caught a fever, and so died :
"A warning to the over vigilant,
—Virtue in a chafe should change her linen quick,
Lest pleurisy get start of providence."

It is refreshing, and atones for a great many tortuous lines, a great many evil passages in Browning's works. This again is surely humour, and surely also it is grim :

"Had I God's leave, how I would alter things!"

He who has never felt that has never lived. It is straight from man's heart ; and few things have ever come from his heart more warm with earnestness. The fine old wine-loving heathen, Omar Khayyam, puts it thus (in Fitzgerald's translation) :

"Ah Love! Could you and I with Him conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits—and then
Remould it nearer to the Heart's Desire!"

Women, medical men, and psychologists will have an idea how far the following is true. I give it here because it is striking and truth-like.

"The strange and passionate precipitance
Of maiden startled into motherhood,
Which changes body and soul by nature's law."

And if we want to know how to get the better of our sins let us ponder these lines:

"Moreover, say that certain sin there seem,
The proper process of unsinning sin
Is to begin well doing something else!"

Leave the evil past severely alone, and concentrate yourself on something new and good. Forget the sin that has been sinned, and in due time it will die of your inattention.

I hope this is not true, but because of its pithiness I give it:

"Mothers, wives and maids,
These be the tools wherewith priests manage men."

The sentimental philanthrophist may read the following; and should remember when he is doing so that it applies to the two-legged brute as well as to the four-footed one:

"Who would teach
The brute man's tameness and intelligence
Must never drop the dominating eye:
Wink—and what wonder if the mad fit break,
Followed by stripes and fasting."

There are fanatics in the world as well as sentimental philanthropists, and here is something for them:

"What imports
Feasting or fasting? Do thy day's work, dare
Refuse no help thereto, since help refused
Is hindrance sought and found. Win but the race—
Who shall object, He tossed three wine cups off,
And just at starting, Lilith kissed his lips."

I have now given considerably over a dozen samples of the wisdom of Browning; and "Lilith" is a sweet name to end with. Accordingly I shall here end; although I could have given another score of dozens equally good. Let not the reader think I have brought up all the gems from this mine, and that if he goes searching for himself he will find nothing there; abundant are the riches left.

It is this copious flow of ideas, of wisdom, that is Browning's most valuable asset; and that in spite of his (at times) dreadful style, will keep him solvent—if anything will—through the future.

Finally, the audience to whom the following lectures were delivered was wholly imaginary, there was no audience. Nor could there easily have been. I began to write them chiefly as a pastime, to relieve the loneliness of a very lonely and quiet existence; not sure whether I would publish them or not. This may account for their not sticking closely, with the rigidity of scientific exposition, to their subject. When a matter came in the way that was not strictly in my brief, but that was interesting, I have paid my respects to it in passing. This has made the lectures somewhat discursive. But their discursiveness may not be to some readers their most objectionable feature. They are meant to be only for beginners in their Browning studies, old stagers at this work will not probably find in them much new. The writing of them has occupied me pleasantly, and has in some degree helped me. Perhaps the reading of them may

help some others. Browning was a man of faith and power; and in these days of religious distraction much that he has written is well worth knowing.

II.

THE MISSION OF THE POET.

BEFORE proceeding further with Browning I would like to offer some thoughts upon poetry in general, upon the mission of the poet. It is a long time since he, the poet, first raised his voice among men. He is the oldest representative of the world of letters, as the woman basket-maker or skin-dresser is the oldest representative of the world of industry. Before history was written, on rock's face or clay tablet, it flowed from his lips in verse; rude no doubt, but vigorous and picturesque, with flashes that illuminated, with passion that moved. The great chief or king—kinglet rather—had among his other followers the Bard, who glorified his martial deeds as the wine cup went round in the hall of feasting. Then as now the song joined with the red wine to lift men's hearts. This primitive poet's facts were probably half fictions, but we will allow them to have been so if they possessed verisimilitude, if they were symbolical, if they let the background of reality shine through. Are the facts of the modern learned chronicler, even the most careful, beyond suspicion? Nobody ever said that they were.

A great man of action called history, "a fable agreed upon," and a modern man of letters has alluded to, "that Mississippi of falsehoods styled history."

In these times there are those who affirm that the poet is nearing the end of his tether. As a person of distinction wielding power among men he is doomed to become extinct; and even now possibly is on his last legs. Give him time and he will go the way of the megatherium and the dodo. The society verse maker and his kind will continue, it is thought, but the inspired singer who holds his reader as in the hollow of his hand will be seen no more. Everybody has read Macaulay's well known passage in his essay on Milton:

"We think that as civilization advances, poetry almost necessarily declines———generalisation is necessary to the advancement of knowledge; but particularity is indispensable to the creation of the poet. In proportion as men know and think more they look less at individuals and more at classes. They therefore make better theories and worse poems."

And so on. It is a superficial view, both of poetry and the general evolution of mind, that is implied in this. In writing it Macaulay was no doubt voicing the spirit, or *a* spirit of his time, a spirit that has grown no less obstrusive since his day. We find it speaking through that distinctively modern writer Mr. Goldwin Smith, in one of the latest volumes—"Guesses at the Riddle of Existence"—which he has published. It also speaks through the late Mr. Charles Pearson,

in his rather remarkable book, "National Life and Character," which a few years ago was in vogue. Mr. Pearson devotes several pages to the subject, and in what he says he agrees with the two writers I have named. But he makes an exception in favour of lyrical poetry, which for the present is growing richer and more various, he thinks; though it too may soon be exhausted. The drama, however, is dying out, and this because passions are becoming not only weaker but commoner, and consequently less interesting. Whether weaker I do not know, but certainly they are becoming less individualistic in character. The solidarity of modern life, in which we are all held together as pebbles in the same stream, is destroying our idiosyncrasies. This of itself would limit the dramatist's opportunities. As coming upon the top of these theories to prove them there is the case of Darwin. The great scientist, devoted as he had been to poetry in his youth, was unable during the latter half of his life even to read it. Scientific specialism had lessened the magnitude of his nature, of his humanity, and he felt no interest in such matters. In a sense there was less of Darwin the old man than there had been of Darwin the young man. With characteristic modesty this is the view that he takes of the circumstance. His mind had become deteriorated, contracted, he indicates, but he had sufficient mind left to be aware of the fact. A good sign I should imagine. He says:

"Up to the age of thirty or beyond it, poetry of many kinds, such as the works of Milton, Gray, Byron, Words-

worth, Coleridge and Shelley, gave me great pleasure, and even as a schoolboy I took intense delight in Shakspeare, especially in the historical plays. . . . But now for many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry. I have tried lately to read Shakspeare and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me. . . . My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of facts ; but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone, on which the higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive. A man with a mind more highly organised or better constituted than mine would not I suppose have thus suffered ; and if I had to live my life again I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least every week ; for perhaps the parts of my brain now atrophied might have been kept active through use. The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature."[1]

So far as this frank, rather sad confession has any bearing on the question whether poetry ought to continue—whether it has got uses, whether it aids our higher development—its testimony is strong for the affirmative. And the suggestion that systematic neglect of poetry may even lead to moral deterioration raises problems of a far-reaching character.

It is not necessary to say that there need be no

[1] Fragment of Autobiography.

conflict between poetry and science, as there is between science and religion. Rather as there used to be: for that conflict has now ceased, and wise persons declare it never should have been. For science and religion never were at variance, which I thoroughly believe; but science and theology, what about them?

Poetry has no particular cosmological system to depend, no set of dogmas it is specially interested in, and upon which therefore its vitality—not to say its very existence—depends. Its pursuit is as consonant with Copernicus and Darwin, as with the Bible and Calvin. More science will not give us less poetry but more, and poetry of a much grander quality. For science has not only enlarged the universe beyond what the old ages could have have dreamed, it has enlarged that part of it we name the unknown. The new word agnosticism, which is new because formerly it was not required, is a proof of this. The mind did not feel the need of such a word, and therefore did not create it. There is now a far wider region of twilight stretching on every side than there used to be; and this is precisely the medium that invites imagination into activity. Further, the indescribable vastness of the universe, and the vastness of the problems that loom around, unsolved, insoluble, not only impress our minds, but impress them to the point of emotion. Are not these the very conditions that suit the poet? that inspire him, that set thoughts even beyond his ken fermenting within him? Never were external conditions so favourable to him before.

Never had he so vast a world of the known, and arising out of this such vast suggestions of the unknown, on which to exercise his art. It is precisely because science has revealed the world as so boundless that she helps him. Her work is to observe, to experiment, to classify, to turn what was ignorance or superstition into well defined knowledge. By all means let her go on with her work. For every square mile of space she conquers in this way she opens up new hundreds of square miles for the poet; through which he may soar on free wing, with a great heart, joyfully bringing back news of what he finds. Consequently I anticipate mightier poets instead of meaner ones in the coming time; I anticipate such showers of song falling upon the parched hearts of men as the earth has hardly yet seen:

> "Ay, the count
> Of mighty Poets is made up, the scroll
> Is folded by the muses; the bright roll
> Is in Apollo's hand: our dazed eyes
> Have seen a new tinge in the western skies:
> The world has done its duty. . . .
> . . . the sun of poesy
> is set."

Trust the poet, it is not. "Science destroys poetry only for a time, destroys it only till the heart bursts into mysticism and out of science brings poetry again." * The heart must burst into mysticism; that is the incontrovertible, primordial, magnificent fact. The heart cannot help itself, the heart must obey its

* Robertson of Brighton.

own law. "Mysticism," says Mr. Balfour, "is a permanent element of the human understanding." And to take from it this element would be like taking from the swallow or the eagle its wings; for it is the surest, most potent, most trustworthy means we possess of forward and upward movement. This is the meaning of the idea or doctrine which runs through Mr. Kidd's popular book, "Social Evolution," the idea, viz., that progress is essentially irrational. Is it not so? The greatest force, the most human force in us is a force we are not rightly conscious of. Reason has tried often to bring it under authority and set bounds to its working, but in vain. It is beyond reason, it is mightier than reason, it snaps its fingers at reason; as well try to bind the wind with cords as bring this force under the self conscious understanding. The logician and scientist will sneer; but let him sneer who wins—who has won in the past, and who possesses the promise of the future. Mr. Kidd says: "The central feature of human history, the meaning of which neither science nor philosophy has hitherto recognised, is apparently the struggle which man, throughout the whole period of his social development, has carried on to effect the subordination of his own reason.

As stated this is hardly correct. But perhaps Mr. Kidd meant it for a paradox. The struggle has rather been to assert his reason, in the face of that unnameable, that mystic force I have just referred to. Mr. Kidd succeeds better when he says: "One of the

most remarkable features of the age we are entering on, will be the disillusionment we are likely to undergo in regard to the part the intellect is likely to play in human evolution." "The intellect," he continues, "is employed in developing ground which has been won for it by other forces. But it has by itself no power to occupy the ground; it has not even the power to continue to hold it after it has been won, when these forces have spent and exhausted themselves."

This is perfectly true. The failure of Christian evidences to beget religious belief, the passion of faith, which they never did beget from the beginning, is an illustration of it. Take a thought from one of the poets,—fundamentally the same thought as Mr. Kidd's; though the author appears to understand better what he is writing about:

"All thoughts that mould the age begin
  Deep down within the primitive soul,
And from the many slowly upward win
  To one who grasps the whole;

In his wide brain the feeling deep
  That struggled on the many's tongue
Swells to a tide of thought, whose surges leap
  O'er the weak thrones of wrong.

All thought begins in feeling,—wide
  In the great mass its base is hid,
And narrowing up to thought, stands glorified,
  A moveless pyramid.

Nor is he far astray, who deems
  That every hope, which rises and grows broad
In the world's heart, by ordered impulse streams
  From the great heart of God." *

The origin of the best and greatest in life is for ever a mystery. The plant that blooms glorious in the sunshine has not more certainly its roots in the dark underground than the highest in man has its source in depths of being which are unfathomable. "The primitive soul!" says Lowell. Can we understand that? can we analyze it? can we turn it inside out and label its contents as we would turn inside out our pocket? I think, never. Let the logician and the man of science do their best; and let us hope that, in response to their efforts,

"Veil upon veil may lift;"

but even so, they will always discover that there is

"Veil upon veil behind."

Then what are the facts of science when we have got them? In answer take this sentence from the late Stanley Jevons, who as a scientific thinker was clear and penetrating: "I fear I have very imperfectly succeeded in expressing my strong conviction that before a rigorous logical scrutiny, the Reign of Law will prove to be an unverified hypothesis, the Uniformity of Nature an ambiguous expression, the certainty of our scientific inferences to a great extent a delusion."

Other high authorities go the length of saying that so called scientific facts are but myths. Actually so.

* Russell Lowell.

Not myths of the most primitive kind, yet hardly differing from the primitive kind except in degree, full cousins to them at least. "I have ventured to ascribe (says Max Muller) even scientific words, such as light, warmth, electricity to the same class of unsound words, and I quite agree with R. Von Mayer, who declared that they were no better than the gods of Greece." * Is it madness to say so? Yes, but it is the madness that has method in it. Evermore do ourselves stand between our thought and the external fact, Kant's "Thing in itself." And evermore will stand, let the man of science and the man of common-sense rage heathen-like as much as they will.

Therefore no man is more sure of his position in the future than the poet, the man who feels the mystery of life and has been dowered with the genius to handle it. Mystery! it takes delicate handling, the most delicate that it has been given the finest order of human faculties to practise. Mystery must not be ardently pursued, as the lover pursues his mistress; it must be simply waited on with all love and patience, with open eye and ear, with a heart subdued to take what comes, not asking whence or how it comes, and not knowing much about what it is. "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh nor whether it goeth." So is every truth that is born of the spirit.

The poet's art is the art of waiting. He who

* Max Müller. "Science of Mythology."

bustles, and presses nature to let out her secret to him is no poet but a worldling. We shall see by-and-by that part of Browning's defect was due to his inability to wait. Poets have their seasons when they flower, but Browning would flower at all seasons, and as the result he has put forth some ill favoured blooms.

As a rule one of the first things a lecturer does is to define his subject. When he can attain to a good definition it gives his hearers a forecast of what is to come, and prepares them to understand it. But I doubt if any subject which it falls to the human mind to consider can be defined exhaustively ; though some subjects are more capable of definition than others. Among the former are the physical sciences, and certain of the sciences of mind, as logic. Among the latter we may name religion and poetry. Both of these are so much things from on high that they cannot be compassed by any definition which the subtlest intellect can frame. If you think they can, you do not understand their nature. If you are satisfied with any such definition, handy and compact, you are not doing them justice, and you are not doing justice to yourself. If you imagine you have got them in such definition, as you have got certain elements in a box, you are mistaken. You have by no means got them ; you have missed their essence, it has escaped you, as balls of quicksilver escape your baffled fingers. The higher we rise amid life's phenomena the more does the mind feel itself at a

loss in dealing with life. Take the piece of coal that just now is blazing on the fire, a scientific lecturer could in a short time give such an account of it as would make you feel when he had finished that you knew all about it. He could do the same with the iron of the grate that contains the coal. And much the same with this glass of water that has been placed before me. Your hand also, he could give a wonderfully exhaustive exposition of that. But if you asked him to tell you with an equal amount of detail what life is, what the soul is, what imagination is, he would if he were a wise man hesitate. He would feel you had fixed him at a point whence no sure, scientific step could be taken. After all that has been written about art, for instance, that specific product of the imagination, that Proteus which reveals itself in so many forms, as painting, poetry, architecture, music, who knows exactly what art is? We can tell when it is present, whether in the book we read or in the picture on our wall, because it speaks to us and moves us. And we can tell when it is absent, or when only its counterfeit is present, because we are not moved; but what in particular that magic is that does move us we cannot tell.

Let us be shy, therefore, in offering a definition of poetry; as shy as Erasmus was with definitions in theology. Suppose we try one, or what is an approximation to one, by a poet: (I quote from memory)

"Then came and lingered on my sight,
Of flowers and stars the bloom and light;
The glory of the earth and sun;
And these and poetry are one."

This is what a logician would call eminently unsatisfactory, disreputably vague; of the jelly-fish order, soft and sentimental with no back-bone. True. But it possesses suggestiveness, and is in the right direction. It puts the mind on a certain track, and leaves it to follow on and make what discoveries it may. Not burdening the mind, not fettering it with conditions, it allows it freedom to work in its own way and come to its own conclusion.

Coleridge justly says that a passage from Sir John Davies may with slight alteration be applied to the poetic imagination; it is from his poem, "Of the Soule of Man And the Immortalitie Thereof;" one of the subtlest, beautifullest poems in the language, and as quaint as it is philosophical:

"Doubtless this could not bee; but that she turnes
Bodies to spirit by *sublimation* strange;
As fire converts to fire the things it burnes,
As we our meats into our nature change.

From the grosse *matter* she abstracts the *formes*,
And draws a kind of *quintessence* from things;
Which to her proper nature she transformes,
To bear them light on her celestial wings."

Here is what a nameless Irishman writing to Tennyson said of music; and it may be said with great

fitness of poetry. "Music tells us of what in all our life we have never known, and never can know."* Such is poetry. It is a voice from our home in the infinite, speaking the language of the infinite, and keeping away into the infinite open for us; a way that the positive sciences would close. Longfellow has written:

"As the winds come in the Spring,
We know not from where;
As the stars come at evening
From the depths of the air;

. . . . . .

So comes to the poet his songs,
All hitherward blown
From the misty land that belongs
To the vast Unknown.

His and not his, are the lays
He sings: and their fame
Is his, and not his; and the praise,
And the pride of a name.

For voices pursue him by day,
And haunt him by night,
And he listens and needs must obey,
When the angel says: "Write!"

Seen in this way poetry is something ethereal, mystical, and how shall we scientifically define that?

*This sentiment is from Paul Richter, who addresses music: "Away! away! thou speakest to me of things which all my endless life I have not found, and shall not find."

It is not possible to define it; and poets who understand their business have warned us against making the attempt. "Let me not dare," writes Walt Whitman, "here or anywhere to attempt any definition of Poetry, nor answer the question what it is. Like Religion, Love, Nature, while those terms are indispensable and we give a sufficiently accurate meaning to them, no definition that has ever been made, sufficiently encloses the name poetry," ("Democratic Vistas.") Wordsworth has attempted a definition which is a failure. He says: "Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; the impassioned expression on the countenance of science." This has been called by one who is himself a poet "The finest definition of poetry on record." Perhaps it is, Mr. W. Watson ought to know. But it is to me simply a mystical utterance, and conveys exact or positive knowledge about nothing. It is one proof more, if such were needed, of the impossibility of defining the indefinable. Goethe, as quoted by Matthew Arnold, is hardly less nebulous: "I deny poetry to be an art. Neither is it a science. Poetry is to be called neither art nor science, but genius;" which can only be described as an explanation of the less obscure by the more obscure. There is less juggling, as well as more sanity and profundity in Niebuhr: "The possibility of poetic creation is an unfathomable enigma." Even so. The lower faculty never can rightly comprehend or expound the higher; whence all the attempts of reason upon imagination,

its attempts to explain what imagination is, and how it works must prove abortive.

Most of the above definitions are in the line of what Plato has written, and may have been drawn directly or indirectly from him. He has devoted a whole dialogue, though a short one, "Ion," to poets and poetry. And there he says that, "Not by art does the poet sing, but by power divine;" which at once removes his singing beyond the ken of critical analysis; its place is among the mysteries. But is Plato speaking seriously here? There is no doubt a little jest, a little irony, a little satirical playing with Ion the rhapsodist, who has the vanity of his profession; but there is also an under-lying element of seriousness; and we have almost certainly got Plato's real opinion on the poetic art here. It is true that in his "Republic" he delivers himself of some strong sayings against poets; but his condemnation of them is only relative; and he says of their art, of poesy, "Let us assure our sweet friend that we ourselves also are very susceptible of her charms." (Jowett's Plato)

All true poets have had a high conception of their mission, and have set a high ideal before them. They did not look upon themselves as "idle singers of an empty day;" whose function it was to increase the sum of pleasure, and of pleasure only. Although that in itself would be no mean achievement. Hear Wordsworth again: "The Poet is the rock of defence for human nature; an upholder and preserver,

carrying everywhere with him relationship and love. In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs; in spite of things silently gone out of mind, and things violently destroyed; the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time." And hear again Walt Whitman, the most modern of the moderns; to whom had poetry been played out, the Time Spirit, if we may be mystical, would have communicated the fact. Whitman says: "The profoundest service that poems or any other writings can do for their reader is not merely to satisfy the intellect or supply something polished and interesting, or even to depict great passions, or persons, or events, but to fill him with vigorous manliness, religiousness, and give him a *good heart* as a radical possession and habit."

Mark, that "vigorous manliness," "religiousness," "a good heart" are declared to be the great ends of poetry and the poet. This shows that in Whitman's conception,—as in Carlyle's, as in Emerson's, as in every man's who has thought seriously about him—the poet is a prophet. Goethe must have been thinking so when he wrote: "The proper gain to our higher nature lies alone in the ideal, which proceeds from the heart of the poet." Here is Carlyle's confession: "An irreligious poet is a monster." And here is Emerson's: "Poetry is a lonely faith, a lonely protest, in the uproar of atheism." Here is that of

another American, which I quote for its pure imaginative beauty, the beauty with which the weird genius of Hawthorne could clothe his subject: "The world assumed another and a better aspect from the hour that the poet blessed it with his happy eyes. The Creator had bestowed him as the last best touch to his own handiwork. Creation was not finished till the poet came to interpret and so complete it." And why should I not quote Browning?

"Ah, that brave
Bounty of poets, the one royal race
That ever was, or will be, in this world!
They give no gift that bounds itself and ends
I' the giving and the taking—theirs so breeds
I' the heart and soul o' the taker, so transmutes
The man who only was a man before
That he grows Godlike in his turn, can give—
He also; share the poet's privilege,
Bring forth new good, new beauty from the old."

Finally Tennyson: "The thoughts of the poet enrich the blood of the world."

How is it that the poet can do all this? how comes he to be such a master, such a magician? It is hard to say how, except it be that, to borrow again from Browning, his thoughts are always, "as never thought before," as new born. There lies a great part of the secret of his power. His word is a word of freshness and life:

"As proud pied April drest in all his trim,
He puts a spirit of youth in everything."

Wherever there is free, joyous life, unjaded, unpolluted, flowing fresh from the mystic fountains, it lays its spell upon us. We are dominated and cease to be our own ; we become its, we abandon ourselves to it, we take deep draughts of it, like tired travellers at wells in the desert. What would we not give for more life? This is all our desire, the ultimate object behind every immediate object of our endeavour, the harvest for which we labour, the pearl of great price for which we pray. We take money with us and go into the marts of fashion to buy it. We seek for it in intoxicants. We launch out in adventure, and hope to find it in hunting the lion or tracking the unknown river to its source. Surely it is in the breath of the Western pine forests, thinks the youth, and he goes to the pine forests in search of it. Civilization has tired man, jaded him, and he needs something primal—auroral, dewy—to renew his humanity. Give me more life, he exclaims, or I die ; give me fresh and strong life, cool and beautiful, blown from the heart of Nature, wherewith to tonic my spirit ! Richard Jefferies' prayer is unconsciously struggling within him, beating at the bars for utterance : the unspoken prayer of us all, with our passion for excitement, our clamour of desire :

"Give me fulness of life like to the sea and the sun, to the earth and the air ; give me fulness of physical life, mind equal to and beyond their fulness ; give me a greatness and perfection of soul higher than all things, give me my inexpressible desire which swells in me like a tide, give it to me with all the force of the

sea. . . . If I had the strength of the ocean and of the earth, the burning vigour of the sun implanted in my limbs, it would hardly suffice to satisfy the measureless desire of life which possesses me. . . . I prayed with the glowing clouds at sunset, and the soft light of the first star coming through the violet sky. At night with the stars according to their season. . . . All the glory of the sunrise filled me with broader and furnace-like vehemence of prayer. That I might have the deepest of soul life, the deepest of all, deeper than all this greatness of the visible universe, and even of the invisible : that I might have a fulness of soul life till now unknown, and utterly beyond my own conception."

What a vast, awe inspiring prayer it is ! something primal and abysmal, a cry out of the deeps that are in man ; a new, almost terrible revelation to us of ourselves, of underlying potencies undeclared as yet. For freshness, for strength, for passion as of the central fires, for height and breadth and depth, for grandeur of sweep, and for remorselessness of longing has it ever been equalled ? Could we find a mightier, more intense prayer in the history of the soul ? And it is the prayer of an "infidel." Which shows how little theological belief or unbelief has to do with that which is the object of all the great religions, the awakening of a desire for soul life ; and the satisfying of this desire. "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly," said He whom we call, and rightly, the Saviour.

"Oh life, life—breath,
Life blood,—ere sleep, come travail, life ere death!
This life stream on my soul, direct oblique,
But always streaming!"[1]

There it is again, Jefferies' prayer, our own soul's prayer, every man's soul's prayer, as soon as he becomes quickened.

Now, it has been given to the poet, more than to other men, to keep the keys of this mystery of life. Tradition says that at one time they were given to St. Peter; but his successors who inherited the custody of the keys did not understand them, and did not know how to use them. They locked up the truth with them, instead of opening and letting it out among men: with the consequence that it wizened and decayed, till what had been a well-spring of beautiful life became a centre of mildew and death. The keys have now passed, or are passing, into the hands of the poet—the vates, the seer, the man with the second sight; who inherits them not in virtue of a formal ordinance, but in right of his qualities as a poet. He is not in the apostolical succession of the church, but he is in the apostolical succession of genius; which never grows old, which asks no favours for itself, which lives not in the cloister but in the world; and which no onslaught of criticism can disturb; for it bases itself neither upon written documents, nor tradition, nor hearsay, but upon the soul. It lovingly guides and nourishes the soul, it gives new life to the soul,

[1] Sordello.

it looks in turn to the soul for support, and it *is* the soul:

> "The soul for ever and for ever; longer than soil is
> brown and solid,
> Longer than water ebbs and flows."

Found upon this truth and you will have calm at the heart of you, found upon it,

> "And thou hast done with fears;
> Man gets no other light,
> Search he a thousand years."

To drop the metaphor, so great a chaos has the theological world become that ever increasing numbers are turning away from it, sad that it affords no light to them. The only and proper refuge for such persons is in the poet, the man who has it in him to

> "Catch the Voice that wanders earth
> With spiritual summons, dreamed or heard."

Consequently a new responsibility is laid upon him; which ought to heighten his conception of his mission and steady him in the doing of it. We seem to have reached one of those crises in the history of religion that have been regularly recurrent; in which the old has not only become worn out but is discovered to be so, and in which the new is not yet born:

> "But now the old is out of date
> The new is not yet born,
> And who can be *alone* elate
> While the world lies forlorn."

It is the true poet's function to help mend this

state of matters, to speed forth with songs that will drive away the forlornness and enable us to be "elate" once more. The new is longing and struggling for birth; let the poet be, as Socrates called himself, an accoucheur and help it into being. Thousands, the self-excommunicated from the churches, are waiting for his evangel, and will welcome it when it comes. They are tired of the withering loneliness of unbelief, and want someone to deliver them; to give them not doctrines but ideals, to stimulate them, to lift them, to keep alive in them the human; which from another point of view is also the divine. It is an onerous work; and to do it the poet needs a certain self consciousness, which will enable him to feel that he is a man among men, and to stand before the proudest. He contributes more than commodities, more than iron and corn to the wellbeing of the world; something without which abundance of iron and corn will only waste and destroy us. It is intangible, this contribution of the poet, it is also indescribable; perhaps to the majority of mankind it is incommunicable. Railways they understand, coal they understand, ships they understand, but this poetry business beats them:

> "I had rather be a kitten and cry mew
> Than one of these same metre ballad-mongers;
> I had rather hear a brazen caustic turned,
> Or a dry wheel grate on the axle tree;
> And that would set my teeth nothing on edge,
> Nothing so much as mincing poetry:
> 'Tis like the forced gait of a shuffling nag."

Is this the voice of that fine "Heart of Oak," the British man of affairs, the successful British man, still? Of some of such men no doubt it is, but not of all. They are not all immersed in matter; with many is the secret of the spirit. These latter know beyond what they are conscious of knowing, and *are* beyond what they are conscious of being. And when the poet comes forward to help, bringing with him nothing but his dreams and fancies they understand. They perceive there is nothing more valuable that he could bring; for it is the dreams of life more than the realities that illumine and comfort us:

"Father, O Father, what do we hear
In this land of unbelief and fear?
The land of dreams is better far,
Above the light of the morning star."[1]

[1] Blake

III.

BROWNING'S GENESIS AND ENVIRONMENT.

THEY are two un-English words, Genesis and Environment, that stand as title over this lecture. But their English, or Saxon cognates, birth and surroundings, could not stand suitably in their places; for they do not mean the same thing, are not of such far-reaching scientific import—using the word scientific with fear and trembling. Environment is not in Johnson's Dictionary; neither in the first edition of it, which was published in 1755, nor in an edition that appeared in 1820. The idea was not in existence then, therefore not the word to express it.

What is the idea? It would take a scientist to tell this correctly, if even he could do it; but we may at least hazard a suggestion. It is that man's surroundings, the things he dwells amid, lie close upon his soul, giving character to it, tincturing it with a flavour of themselves. Not, certainly, as much character as it gets from his parents, but enough to be an estimable quantity in the making of him as a man. If we had the finer sense, which we may get some day,

in the æons to come, in the new "Avatars" we are journeying to, we would see it all plain.

Genesis Johnson defines simply as, "Generation. The first book of Moses, which treats of the production of the world."

But what again is generation? No man can tell; save that it is a subtle, long-drawn-out process with endless ramifications, and begins ages before the thing generated appears. There is reason to think that when the individual, the human soul let us say, bursts the bonds of the invisible and becomes a denizen of the visible it is already old. Parts of it are old. Occult forces have been getting it ready for its birth from a distant time; but how distant a time we cannot even guess. This is the doctrine of heredity. And it makes the study of ancestry not merely of social but of scientific interest and value; a study for thinkers as well as for dilettantes with an enlarged consciousness of family.

Browning's biographers—they are few—have not been able to trace his lineage very far back; but it is certain there were several strains of blood in his veins—English, Scottish, German, and perhaps a strain that of all others gives most tenacity to character, the Jewish. It has been said that to the German element in him we must trace much of his obscurity, as perhaps we must. This element, granting there was equal distribution, would form a fourth part of the whole; his grandfather on the mother's side being a German, who plied his calling of merchant in Dundee. But

this German blood brought the poet no predilection for metaphysics; which he never seems to have studied, either at first hand for himself, or through Coleridge, who in his youth was the British oracle upon this subject. His mind was too concrete, too artistic, poetic for that.

Of this German grandfather, as of the grandfather on the other side, the biographers give no details. Probably because they possess none. They simply tell who they were and pass on. But more is known, and accordingly more is told of the father; in whom we find distinct traces of idealism and romance, the first outwellings of the stream of poetry. He appears to have had very decided convictions, and a very decided taste. The former is shown by his giving up a good situation in the West Indies at the bidding of his anti-slavery feeling; the latter in the books, pictures and lettered friends he gathered round him in London, and in the drawings he made of visitors to the Bank of England, where he was a clerk. Crœsus comes in to draw money or deposit it, and while he is doing so Robert Browning transfers his visage to a piece of cardboard, or whatever else is convenient. It was an innocent enough pastime. But a straw shows how the wind blows; and the elder Browning did this doubtless because he had pleasure in it, because he could not help it, because it was in his blood. It explains the strong artistic feeling that all through life dominated his son.

We may also note of the father that he had the

courage which genius gives a man in matters of taste, he called his daughters Clara and Sarianna; having previously had the courage to marry a wife Sarianna. It appears that the poet had resolved to hand on this latter name in his family had he got the chance; but Providence in His goodness denied him it.

They say that no family has a physique strong enough to bear London for more than three generations; such is the wearing out power of the Great Babylon. London is a modern Cronos and destroys her own children. Whether it be so or not, the poet represents the third generation of Brownings who were Londoners; his great-grandfather being a small landed-proprietor and inn-keeper, or inn-owner, in Dorsetshire. I like to be able to trace "Robert Browning, writer of plays," back to the soil. It is a far cry from "Sordello" and "Paracelsus" to English rural life of the eighteenth century; from Italian art galleries and the chatter of dilettantes to the solid, simple ways of the old fashioned farmer.

But there are no traces of a farming ancestry—of men who sauntered forth on dewy mornings among their beeves, or bent to the hay in June meadows—in the poet. He was a man of books and pictures, of the theatre and the salon, of old architecture and old statuary, of whatever thing created by man has the glamour of age or of art upon it. But we hope he did not forget his ancestor of the plough and the reaping hook—may we add of the ale mug also? We hope his thoughts sometimes wandered back to

that natural life in Dorsetshire, which would be an admirable antidote to the artificial life of society he much indulged in.

Who knows but from this old son of the soil he got something of his fine physique? For nature had been kind to him in body as in mind, had turned him out with physical parts worthy of his intellectual and imaginative ones. It was in no mean earthly tabernacle that Robert Browning's soul was lodged. Not a commanding, statuesque figure, like Tennyson's, which catches the eye from afar; but a figure that stands extremely well scrutiny at close quarters. In this respect his person was like his verse, the one a counterpart of the other. Not tall, but well knit, well proportioned, muscular, wiry, "sound in wind and limb," and tingling with life to the finger tips:

"Made up of an intensest life,"

as he himself declares. An admirable figure for holding its own in a world whose prime fact, or law, is the struggle for existence. The worse luck to Browning that he was brought up and lived all through in a kind of hothouse, getting no chance to prove himself in the "rough and tumble" of every-day life. With that body and brain of his he need not have feared; he could have voyaged over rough seas; and he might have come into port at last even more grandly than he did. In youth his face is finely oval, and lit up with an expression of alertness and healthiness that in a poet is rare; "no harebrained sentimental trace" upon it. In age it is the same face, but with

considerably more flesh, and looking absolute good will, calm and contentment, as became the resolute optimist he was.

What part did the ancestral women play in forming and turning out this notable character? One of them was Scottish with German blood in her; which is an admirable cross for arriving at either high practical or high speculative qualities. Another was a Creole, and may have brought to the poet that fire and passion which the southern sun is credited with giving his children. Although, for a poet, Browning is singularly devoid of passion; most devoid perhaps of all the "tuneful brethren" that have attained to fame. He has intensity, but he never forgets himself, never becomes possessed, has escaped that glow of soul which overmasters and carries along its victim like a flood.

His mother appears to have been of the nervous or neurotic sort, with intellectual gifts, ardours and affections; and very ready to believe that the man-child she had brought into the world was a genius. Ready also to do her mother's best in cultivating this genius. She was musical and played to him; and discovering that he not only loved music, but was entranced by it, she played the more. Later she sallied forth among the booksellers and purchased him books; in particular the works of Shelley and Keats; the former of whom became for a time as a god to him. He was still under the glamour when he wrote "Pauline;" where he gives Shelley no less an appellation than

"Sun treader," and visibly burns incense at his altar. But he gradually escaped, as he was sure to do; possessing too solid parts, a too Antaeus-like affinity with earth, to be long subject to the author of "Epipsychidion"—the aerial creature, like a streak of vapour in the sky.

While the mother was thus busy attending to her child's genius the father was not idle; he was doing his part in the same work; telling his boy the story of Troy and suchlike; having prepared him for this while he was in long clothes by humming him to sleep with the odes of Anacreon. No homely, old fashioned English lullabies for the author of "Paracelsus"! Is there not even in the most singular events a latent, an unconscious fitness?

His father had quite independent views about educating him, which he carried out, as is now proved, with the best possible results. Instead of sending him to a public-school and university he put him under private tuition; where apparently he learned to read Latin and Greek, and at least one modern language, French. The formal traditional stuff that in the name of philosophy and *belles-lettres* is dispensed at universities could have done him no good; it would only have put him to the trouble of getting rid of it at the first opportunity. Browning used to say, "Italy was my university," which in truth it was; but not, perhaps, with the undiluted advantages to him, either as man or poet, he imagined.

We have seen that he was well proportioned, well

knit, lithe and active in body; and it was fit that this body should receive its education no less than the mind. Which it did. He was put to fencing, boxing, the polite art of dancing, and to riding; in the last named of which he is said to have excelled; his seat in the saddle was firm and graceful above the common. It is obvious he had gifts qualifying him to be a successful man of action if fate had required it; he could have worried along in the melee of the world, and asserted himself there among the strongest. Strength! that is the most outstanding quality of Browning; and it manifests itself equally in his body as in his mind. A great heritage surely to any one! But in some ways strength limited Browning, as it generally does limit those who are lucky enough to possess it. It disqualifies them from rightly understanding the weak, and from sympathizing with the weak; and as the weak form the larger part of mankind the strong are in this way shut out from half the world, from half of what makes the sum-total of human life. Browning undoubtedly was; and chiefly in virtue of what have been regarded as his great qualities, his physical and moral healthiness, his constitutional strength; to which may be added, probably, his social good fortune. It was with him as, according to Matthew Arnold, it was with Wordsworth, whose

"eyes avert their ken
From half of human fate."

There appears to have been moments when a

consciousness of this fact was borne in upon him; as in "The Ring and The Book," where he says,

> "Strength may have its
> drawbacks weakness 'scapes!"

We have to learn our several lessons in life; and the weak man learns a very different lesson from the strong man; but not necessarily one less valuable.

As the outcome of his constitutional vigour, and doubtless of the happy environment he was born into, Browning had a passionate hatred of morbidness. He could not understand how anybody should be sick, in soul or in sense, while he was well. And he would not have allowed them to be sick if he could have helped it, if by *a-tour-de-force* he could have shaken them out of their sickness. His biographers tell how, when on this subject of morbidness, he would become quite excited, and with his powerful fist would make the tables suffer. It was picturesque, but a little pedagogic. Especially as sickness and health are to a large extent relative, there being no absolute entity which has been agreed upon as corresponding to either. What is health from one point of view may be sickness from another; and what is sickness from one point of view may be health from another. "The beginning of inquiry is disease," says Carlyle; and he quotes a philosopher who goes so far as to declare that, "Life itself is a disease; a working incited by suffering; action from passion." Whence it would follow that the suffering man is in more vital relation to the world, and has a larger promise of attainment,

than the non-suffering or happy one. This latter will sit still; the former is too miserable to sit still, as the less of two evils he will be up and doing. Browning himself has taught this doctrine in "Paracelsus," where he fears that sickness is the source of all we boast of:

> "So, sickness lends
> An aid; it being, I fear, the source of all
> We boast of, mind is nothing but disease,
> And natural health is ignorance."

Obviously he should have been more sparing of the tables.

There was remarkable appropriateness in Browning, who was so fond of society, and who dwelt all his days where the currents of life flow strong, being born in London. Probably no other city has so much to give them who are capable of receiving much. Politically it is the centre of the earth; and were it not for the shade of Victor Hugo, and for Frenchmen generally, we might say it is earth's social and intellectual centre also. How mightily the pulse of human life beats in London! not in a feverish or fluttering way, but with a strong, steady, determined beat, as if its sources would never fail:

> "Murmur of living,
> Stir of existence,
> Soul of the world!"

Is it fanciful to say that its atmosphere must be charged with an amount of psychic force, mind-stuff,

thrown off the brains of millions of workers, which makes intellectual effort easy? People who only vegetate in country places should have no trouble to actually live in London:

"Wherever men are gathered, all the air
Is charged with human feeling, human thought;
Each shout and cry and laugh, each curse and prayer
Are into its vibrations surely wrought:
Unspoken passion, wordless meditation,
Are breathed into it with our respiration;
It is with our life fraught and overfraught."

"So that no man there breathes earth's simple breath
As if alone on mountains or wide seas,
But nourishes warm life or hastens death
With joys and sorrows, health and foul disease,
Wisdom and folly, good and evil labours,
Incessant of his multitudinous neighbours;
He in his turn affecting all of these."

It is intensely true of London. How different is this rural place where to-night we are gathered! What is breathed into the air here? what floats around us? The thoughts and passions of grass and trees, if they have got such, (and poets say they have); the thoughts and passions of many sheep; the thoughts and passions of two hundred peasants, who enjoy (and know it not) the primal blessedness of the unawakened mind. How still it all is! the place for a man to be laid softly after death takes him if he would sleep well. How beautiful is Nature here! how green her hills! how pure her atmosphere! how unpolluted her

streams! how unmolested her wild flowers season after season bloom and die! The man who would live "The Intellectual Life" here, which perhaps he has no business to attempt, must be self supporting. Or he must fall back upon books; which, however, have this drawback, let them be as artistically finished as they like, let the finest genius have gone to the making of them, they do not radiate life. Not at least like a living soul. But I must back to Browning and London.

Such a city! What a multitude of interests have their headquarters there! Government, diplomacy, law, soldiering, trade and commerce, money, literature and art, science, philanthrophy, goodness and wisdom, vice and crime, the gilded thing called Society, and the much ungilded thing called "The Submerged Tenth"—the whole gamut of human life with all that pertains to it is present there. Catch the most fantastic being npon earth, the elective affinities will find a mate for him in London. Catch the wisest and best, he also will find his fellow. To varieties of character and endowment there is no end. The streets alone—the people that throng them, the vehicles that roll along them, the piles of building that overshadow them, the babel of sounds that rises from them, the multitudinous wares from all the earth that look from their shop windows—afford the means of a liberal education. A man might become wise, cultured, a man of knowledge, in the streets of London without opening a book.

A great statesman as he drove through those streets once rebuked a discontented youth beside him by bidding him look at the shop windows—at the brightly coloured lobsters and the silver-bodied salmon in the fishmongers alone. In doing which he showed that he was not all politician ; he had the feeling of an artist, he had the artist's eye.

The young Browning appears to have come into contact with this multitudinous London life only at a few points, the literary and artistic. The mere streets, with the throng of common-place humanity that filled them, and the commerce that lumbered along them, are not said to have interested him. But he went to the National Gallery, to the theatre, to concert halls, to museums, to wherever, in short, fine music or fine pictures, or things old and artistic, were to be found. He was not then, or ever after, alive to the poetry of average humanity, of every day things. He must have an out-of-the-way subject, one that the common mind was not thinking about, to tempt his muse. This, as well as his ruggedness, was a cause of his works being long unheeded.

How different the great poet of America, his contemporary, Walt Whitman, to whom the life of New York streets was as the breath of his nostrils. When he would abandon himself and be happy he spent the day sauntering along Broadway, or riding in an omnibus, interviewing its driver, or crossing and recrossing Brooklyn Ferry, which he specially loved. In such places and by such means he found his inspir-

ation. Nothing filled and satisfied him so much as to be rubbing shoulders with the people; and to be making himself one of them. He got from them a kind of knowledge, and an impulse that books, even the choice ones, do not provide. After all, heart answereth to heart best. The study of a book can never teach us as the study of our fellow-man can: provided we have the talent for this latter; which possibly we have not; not many have.

Browning set about the business of poet in a most business-like fashion; not as if intoxicated by a draught from Helicon, as if moved to it by the verdict of his understanding. He knew himself—his tastes, his capacities, his circumstances, and reviewing these he deliberately said to himself he would be a poet. There appears to have been no emotion in the matter, none of the traditional fine frenzy in his eyes rolling, and, *nolens volens*, carrying him along. He was never much of the rapt Hebrew bard, either now or at any period of his life. A man of learned and artistic tastes, with powers to follow these tastes and acquit himself well in them—to be original, creative, instructive, incisive, potent, pleasing, penetrating and stimulating; a tonic to the spirit, a medicine-man to the soul, a setter forth of the soul's secrets—that was all. But it was a great deal surely, enough to justify him in the decision he arrived at in his unemotional way.

His father, a sound-headed business man, who had been handling money all his life and had learned its

value, spoke to him one day about an occupation. Robert's mind was made up, but he appears at first to have been shy, to have had a delicacy; he hummed and hawed like one not wishing to commit himself. But at last he got the length of asking, how it would be with his sister if for his part he elected to do nothing? Was the paternal purse fat enough to support both of them in idleness? It was. After which the son had no more trouble: the affectionate father took the matter out of his hands and settled it for him. "In short, Robert, I perceive your design is to be a poet." Robert owned to the soft impeachment; and there and then it was decided that a poet he should be. Was ever youthful mind dedicated to the muses in such a business-like way?

And the young Robert Browning was to be a great poet, as fully equipped an one as money, purchasing the aid of all those arts and opportunities that unfold the mind, could make him. In the first place he was to travel. And the originality of the two men, and the magnitude of their enterprise are shown by the fact that Russia was included in the tour. Not many Englishmen in those days of no railways, and of much less money than now, went to Russia. But young Browning, who was to come to greatness in the poetic line, must not miss it. A probable reminiscence of his trip to that country is embodied in his "Ivan Ivanovitch;" a really spirited poem, which tells how an unnatural Russian mother had poetic justice dealt upon her by a village carpenter. In his righteous

indignation he rushed against her with his axe; and with the blow which a strong man when he is excited gives he struck off her head. Immediately the law was up in arms against the murderer; but Ivan's human-hearted fellow villagers, with their natural sense of right, were up in arms for him. And they won. There is poetry in the subject, and there is poetry in Browning's manner of treating it.

I have said that Browning chose the calling of poet in a way that was singularly deliberate for a son of genius. But there is plenty of evidence in his poems that he knew something about the inner voice also, "the potent, felt, interior, commmand stronger than words," which is always the commission for a man like him. In his earlier poems, "Pauline" and "Paracelsus," and also in "Sordello," that monstrous excrescence on the fair field of literature, there are traces of the inner voice being at work. And very actively at work too. It was impossible after the struggle, the subjective movement and change shadowed forth in these poems for Browning to go through the world in silence, as the commonplace man goes. He had got something to say—something to say had been forced upon him, and he must needs say it or be miserable, have the Hebrew prophet's "fire-in-the-bones." The thoughts he had bred if not uttered would consume him; but a timely utterance would give him relief. Wherefore he sang.

It has been the same with all men whose writings, or whose life work has been of real value to the world

Nature did not give them wide range of choice as to what they would do or not do with themselves. Necessity was laid upon them, they could not help themselves. A voice had spoken to them with irresistible force, whence they knew not, but from somewhere beyond the noises. A voice not to be reasoned with more than the soldier may reason with the commands of his general. "What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?" asked Thoreau. "You may say the wisest thing you can, old man—you who have lived seventy years, not without honour of a kind,—I hear an irresistible voice which invites me away from all that." It is a voice that a class of men since the days of Socrates with his attending demon, and since before his days, have known well.

What else could they do when it spoke to them but listen? For who knows for certain what it is, whether a god's voice, or only an aimless and wandering echo, from nobody knows where. The best thing, therefore, is to report what it says, and let mankind be the judge; assured that in the end their judgment will be right. What the great human heart finally rejects will deserve to be rejected. It is in this faith that men of genius have given voice to the original thoughts that were in them, how and whence they could not tell. They knew no more about their origin than we know. But they felt them in their souls, seething there, and that to have peace with themselves they must needs utter them, even at the cost of facing suffering. When Emerson told Walt Whitman that

certain passages in his book, "Leaves of Grass," ought not to be published he—Whitman—simply listened. But as Emerson finished he replied: "My mind is not changed; I feel, if possible, more strongly than ever, that those pieces should be retained." What did Emerson do then? He showed his wisdom. "Very well then," he said, "let us go to dinner."

And they went. It is not stated that they went; but we feel that so transcendently sane a suggestion could not be disregarded. It exhibits Emerson's genius even more than his written works; which partake too much of the unclothed abstraction, the skeleton without flesh and blood, without humanity, and without the power, therefore, to influence humanity. But this is human nature in its marrow and its fatness; and we warm to Emerson for having laid aside the transcendentalist and spoken it. When a man shows his weakness we begin to love him, that is the way to our hearts. I suppose Sydney Smith was thinking of the same truth when he stated that the best way to treat a fanatic was to invite him to dinner. And, speaking of fanaticism, this same inner voice, or supposed inner voice, has been responsible for a good deal of that, and for some of the havoc it has worked. Which but reminds us that most things have got their dark side as well as their bright one in this world; nothing is altogether good, as nothing is altogether evil:

"Men are every where by halves."

"No man is so good
That a fault follows him not,
Nor so bad that he is good for nothing."

So says the old Saga, the "Havamal;" and it is the height of wisdom. Were men wholly of either the one quality or the other it is difficult to see where progress would come in; that being the resultant of a conflict, incessant and fierce, between forces that in their nature are opposite. A completely wise and good world would be a completely insipid world, flat, stale and unprofitable, unbearable to both gods and men.

Browning, however, is no fanatic. He had a natural tolerance, strengthened by much acquired knowledge, which saved him from that. He simply offers his experience, objective and subjective, and lets us take it or not. He writes, e.g.:

"I have gone the whole round of creation; I saw and I spoke:
I, a work of God's hand for that purpose, received in my brain
And pronounced on the rest of his handwork—returned him again
His creations approval or censure: I spoke as I saw:
I report as a man may of God's work—" ("Saul.")

And again, in regard to a question of never dying interest, which is always in bloom, so to speak, as the whin[2] is, the question of our immortality, he says:

[2] "The never bloomless furze." Coleridge. And they have a saying in Galloway, "When the whin's out o' bloom, love's out o' fashion."

"I have lived, then, done and suffered, loved and hated, learnt and taught
This—there's no reconciling wisdom with a world distraught,
Goodness with triumphant evil, power with failure in the aim,
If—(to my own sense, remember! though none other feel the same!)—
If you bar me from assuming earth to be a pupil's place,
And life, time,—with all their chances, changes—just probation space,
Mine for me, but those apparent other mortals—theirs, for them.
Knowledge stands on my experience: all outside its narrow hem,
Free surmise may sport and welcome!" ("La Saisiaz")

Once more:—

"From thine apprehended scheme of things, deduce
Praise or blame of its contriver, shown a niggard or profuse
In each good or evil issue! nor miscalculate alike
Counting one the other in the final balance, which to strike
Soul was born and life allotted: ay, the show of things unfurled
For thy summing up and judgment—thine, no other mortal's world." ("La Saisiaz")

We have to learn our lesson, if it is to be a true lesson, vitalizing and informing, each one for himself: and the loneliness of doing it is sometimes one of the

bitterest drops in our cup. How we do wish that someone might tell us! But the fates have decreed no.

> "Yes! in the sea of life enisled,
> With echoing straits between us thrown,
> Dotting the shoreless watery wild
> We mortal millions live *alone*.
> The islands feel the enclasping flow,
> And then their endless bounds they know."
>
> . . . . .
>
> Who ordered that their longings' fire
> Should be as soon as kindled, cool'd?
> Who renders vain their deep desire?
> A God, a God their severance ruled!
> And bade betwixt their shores to be
> The unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea."

Such is our destiny. And when we have recognised this destiny and submitted to it, when we have bowed ourselves and withdrawn into loneliness of soul, to learn there the deep truths of life, what we may say or write after is of service. Otherwise it is only the repetition of an ancient tale, which has been told and told again, but never told well except by the first narrator of it. How much ephemeral literature, especially in philosophy, is of this character; its thoughts have been hunted out of volume after volume by the learned plodder, and when he presents it to the public dressed up in the newest style—his style—it is a thing without life; jaded and dulled by too much handling, like a popular belle at the end of

her "season." The old ideas have been once more through the mill, and are a little drier from the process; that is all. The public feel they have no life, (though they don't know why) and instinctively turn away from them. It was of such literature Schopenhauer was thinking when he said: "How learned many a man would be if he knew everything that is in his books!" How learned, truly!

Browning, as we have seen, was a born lover of books and pictures, of everything that exhibited art, the unnameable charm. But he loved Nature also. And believing that she had information to give him, and feelings to waken in him beyond the books, he went early to her.

Upon his self-culture he was resolutely, perhaps too resolutely set; and he left out nothing that would help this forward. Nature had to be included among his other teachers.

They say that in some parts of Hungary there still exists that most ancient representative of poetic literature, the rhapsodist; who not only sings or recites old ballads, but makes new ones of his own. He is, therefore, something of a poet. All blind children are almost from their infancy devoted to this calling. And they are very early put to training; which is of a primitive character, and measured by our artificial standards not likely to produce results. But measured by a more natural one, by an ideal standard, as well adapted to the end as possible. "At ten years of age a gusla (musical instrument) is

bought for him, and he is led in the mornings into the neighbouring forest, where he is left until the evening, seated on the moss at the foot of a pine tree. The child listens to the melancholy moaning of the wind among the branches, the vague noises which stir the depths of the wood, the songs of the birds, the rustlings of the leaves, and the insects ; then, gradually imbued by the grand poetry of nature, he studies to produce on his gusla all these harmonious sounds instinct with poetry and mystery."[3] It is thus that the wild music of the Hungarian peasant, which appeals to the nature in us as Beethoven appeals to the culture, is created.

But how could they lead forth young Browning, from that mighty wilderness of stone and lime, London, to a place of pines and loneliness ? It appears that he led forth himself.

Among the places to which in early days he made pilgrimage were the Dulwich woods ; where he would loiter alone for hours, watching and listening, and letting nothing escape him that the most searching eye and the most listening ear could take in. His eyes were like those of his own Duchess, " whose looks went everywhere," they could almost see flying bullets. Thus he brought himself into contact with Nature, and trained himself to love her ; which to the poet above all men is essential. He must be in league with her or he will sing weakly and out of tune. Only from her fountains can he draw that freshness

[3] Tissot's " Unknown Hungary."

which must be perennial in his mind. Carlyle, as we have seen, said that, "an irreligious poet is a monster;" equally so is a poet who is indifferent to Nature. It is to Browning's solitary wanderings by Dulwich—why not call them religious musings?—that we owe those descriptions of scenery in his poems, which, although sometimes overloaded, always show power.

In "Pauline" there are lines which indicate that he not only loved Nature, but at moments actually became Nature; identified himself with her, was one with flower and bee, whose life he felt beating in him, and whose life he voiced. His breast he bared to the "sunbeams" and to "the dim stars," and these also quickened his blood:

"I can live all the life of plants, and gaze
Drowsily on the bees that flit and play,
Or bare my breast for sunbeams which will kill,
Or open in the night of sounds, to look
For the dim stars; I can mount with the bird
Leaping airily his pyramid of leaves
And twisted boughs of some tall mountain tree,
Or rise cheerfully springing to the heavens;
Or like a fish breathe deep the morning air
In the misty sun-warm water; or with flower
And tree can smile in light at the sinking sun
Just as the storm comes, as a girl would look
On a departing lover—most serene."

There is not only wild nature, as seen in the cloistered forest and the unploughed moorland, there is wild human nature, as seen in gipsies and other "commoners of air"—"the pheasants and roebucks of

the human race," they have been called,—and Browning made it a point to learn something of that. Some element of wildness in his blood, the irreducible residum of the savage that is in most of us, especially in men of genius, drew him to it. "How I love," exclaims Hazlitt, "to see the camps of the gipsies, and to sigh my soul into that sort of life." The author of "Paracelsus" felt the same. He felt that they who were wholly untaught themselves had something—some secret of our being which civilization covers over—they might impart to him. And he went among them. He would join himself to whatever "gangerels" he fell in with, and talking with them learned what the books could not teach him. Genius must not only do the like of this to educate itself, it cannot help doing it; to do so is its instinct. He sinned socially, like another and greater, who was attacked by the correct ones for eating bread with publicans and sinners.

To Robert Browning, the soul dissector, nothing that wears the human form was too mean as a subject.

There is a reminiscence of those happy vagrant days in "Fifine at the Fair"; where he makes what we cannot doubt is a confession. After forty years the old feeling had come back upon him, and he lets it out thus:

"How the pennon from its dome (the airy structure ot
the play-actors)
Frenetic to be free, makes one red stretch for home!

. . . .

And do you know their beats
Something within my breast as sensitive?—repeats
The fever of the flag? My heart makes just the same
Passionate stretch, fires up for lawlessness, lays claim
To share the life they lead: losels, who have and use
The hour what way they will."

We must not omit an event that appears to have brought a new cup of happiness to Browning; deepening his conviction, doubtless, that

"God's in his heaven.
All's right with the world."

This is his marriage. It belongs to no less a place than the glorious old kingdom of romance. It was a runaway match. The lady was an invalid, and to all appearance a confirmed one; had to pass most of her time on the sofa, where, feeling the hours go slowly, she took to writing poetry; as an invalid lady may quite innocently do. But Robert Browning came, and Cupid came along with him. Cupid beat the doctors. Cupid cured her. Under his treatment she discovered that she was strong enough to be a wife; nay, when her father proved pig-headed, strong enough to run away that she might be made one; and by-and-by even strong enough to be a mother, which in two and a half years she became. 'Tis the blind god that can work miracles. Mrs. Jameson, the writer upon art, boded ill from the union, and wrote, "God help them! for I know not how the two poet heads and poet hearts will get on through this prosaic world." They got on excellently well; loving each

other, aiding each other, and admiring each other as great geniuses to the end.

It is all beautiful and pathetic; especially so that the end came sooner than it might have done. Browning's simple-mindedness and loyalty towards his wife's literary productions is one of the things about him that we love; as we love a weakness in any great man, for instance, Emerson's sagacity about dinner.

It is sometimes hinted that a man of genius instead of marrying should take the simple old-Adam way with the sex, and keep himself free for his art, make it his wife. I am not going to enter upon this savoury question. I only know that some geniuses—Turner was one of them, Schopenhauer another—who followed this path—(so far at least as not marrying went) did not become happy by doing so. And there is every reason to believe that Browning by not following it became a great deal happier. I have nothing to say about Mrs. Browning the Poetess; except that in a world so wicked as this her poetry has no reason to complain of having been neglected. But as the wife of her husband she was every way satisfactory. He found in her his ideal, he loved her, he admired her poetry (is not love blind?); while she in turn drew out his tenderness, softened him, humanized him, and when she was taken from him—all too soon—she left behind a void in him that was never filled. "I want her! I want her!" cried the strong man, breaking down in the vehemence of his grief; he who

broke down so seldom. It is simple, and natural, but it is terrible. Like David over his son Absalom, "O my son, Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom my son, my son!" Deep sorrow from deep souls seeks not many words.

Never was the theory of the elective affinities more beautifully vindicated than in the marriage of the Brownings; and never was Schopenhauer's theory more signally disproved. This latter is that people who marry for love are, without knowing it, fools; they are brought together by the spirit of the species only for a certain purpose, that they may have children, that through them the species may be continued. This accomplished he (the spirit) lets the fires of love die down in them, and they begin to hate each other. Ungrateful dog!

Miss Thackeray gives a reminiscence of the Brownings' early married life that is noteworthy; and that to bad anti-Browningites who have the sense ot humour may afford amusement.

"It was in the same apartment," (in Paris) she writes, "that I remember hearing Mr. Browning say across all these years. 'It may seem to you strange that such a thing as poetry should be written with regularity at the same hour in every day. But nevertheless I do assure you it is a fact that my wife and I sit down every morning after breakfast to our separate work; she writes in the drawing-room, and I write in here,' said he, opening a door into a back empty room with a window over a court."

It is strange, as Browning himself felt; but one is never too old to learn. So many hours a day of work, so many lines of poetry as product. This in Paris. But change the scene, say to Lancashire, and so many hours a day of work, so many yards of calico as product. No wonder if "Homer sometimes nods;" and no wonder if Homer's wife only "sometimes wakes."

Let me touch upon Browning and Italy, and bring this lecture to a close. To the ordinary Briton, who toils at money-making all day—God bless him! and feeds his intellectual part upon novels, and sometimes a look into a cyclopaedia, Italy is only a country on the map of Europe. It has the misfortune of being very poor, and weak politically, and of containing the headquarters of that man of sin the Pope—who is no ornament, he thinks, antique piece of goods though he be. I would not be thought as sneering at this worthy man's view. Nor at himself. He and his kind have done as much for the world as ever did the literary class. In fact he is so important that but for him there would be no literary class. I have made mention of his Italy to bring out in more vivid contrast with it the Italy of the artist's and poet's dream.

Let me tell what another poet said about Italy, then let me tell, in brief, what Browning says. That other poet is one of the most interesting figures in the literature of Europe, a man upon whose brow there rests eternally a profound, but a lurid and pathetic beauty; that other poet is Heinrich Heine. By way

of describing Italy in brief, giving a pocket picture of it, he says:

"Knowest thou the land where the citron blooms?"

"Do you know that song? The whole of Italy is pictured therein, but with the sighing colours of longing."

It is a song that consists of three verses; and each verse touches upon a separate feature, or portion of Italy. The first upon its sky blue, balmy climate; which draws forth from its soil a vegetation with colours so glowing that they are as wine to the blood. The second verse touches upon the "Statue and the House," the architecture of Italy, which from its age and associations has poetry in every stone.

Lastly there is the "Mountain" and the "Flood," with the hardy mule groping his way, high up, among the mists there. Surely God has been kind to this beautiful land; surely he meant it as a nursing-ground for poets; the lower portion to quicken their natural sense of beauty, their eye for colour; the higher portion to keep alive in them the strain of manhood, something wild and free; the architecture, which seems made less to live in than for preserving history, to impress upon them the past. Browning appears to have thought so, for he passed the greater part of his life in Italy. Here is what he says:

"Italy, my Italy!
Queen Mary's saying serves for me——
(When fortune's malice
Lost her—Calais)——

Open my heart and you will see
Graved inside of it, "Italy."
Such lovers old are I and she:
So it always was, so shall ever be!"

Of course he says much more than this throughout his poems, but this for the present will be enough.

Such is the land in which Browning lived so much, which fed his soul from day to day, whose glamour and whose beauty rested on him as an influence, and subtly, mystically stole into his verse. Where it lives still.

IV.

BROWNING'S CHOICE OF SUBJECTS.

THE man of true literary genius has no difficulty in discovering subjects to write about, the subjects discover him. One comes to him to-day, another comes to-morrow, a third the day after, in endless beautiful procession, even while he sleeps. In a world so vast and well furnished as this, how should there be a dearth of subjects? The dearth is rather of minds to deal with them, to open the eyes of common-place humanity to what lies around, the

> "Vast
> Exhaustless beauty, endless change
> Of wonder!"

as Browning himself has phrased it.

Another thing is this, if we had the eyes of angels and could see into God's secrets we would see that the mind and its subject come together not accidentally but by law. There is no such thing as chance probably in all this universe. It is not even by chance that I say so; a bed-rock fact this, which gives the doubter comfort at last, after all else has

proved bog under his feet. Order, Cosmos, is the most majestic of all the gods that man's imagination can introduce into his Pantheon.

"A man's mind," says Emerson, "is a selecting principle," which puts the matter in a nut shell. And it selects we know not how, and we know not when; for its working is part of our deeper life, all whose operations are subconscious. But we rise up and lie down, we come and go, and one day we discover that something has come to us that we possessed not before. It is thus that we are made:

> "Now I've a notion if a poet
> Beat up for themes his verse will show it:
> I wait for subjects that hunt me,
> By day or night wont let me be,
> And hang about me like a curse,
> Till they have made me into verse."[1]

It is even so. The true poet's proper subject, that appointed him by the laws of affinity, is a curse to him until he gives heed to it. He may think to escape from it, but it has him too tightly. Anxious, perhaps, to produce something marketable, which will help boil his pot for him, he goes after popular themes; but as he writes upon them he is pained to discover the weakness of his hand. It is not the hand he had flattered himself it was. In the end he comes back to himself, that is, to the theme that had been preappointed him, and ever afterwards goes

[1] Lowell.

greatly; happy in the feeling of his own power at least, if not in the favour of the multitude.

This is how, I opine, we must explain the unusualness of many of Browning's subjects, a thing that has often been remarked upon. He had to take them or want; or do commonplace work on better known ones, which would have been worse than want. But he took them. I am not one of those who think it was mere eccentricity, the desire to make himself singular, that led him to do so. Honour in war, and honour in literary criticism! Had it been eccentricity he could not have distilled from them, by the alchemy of his brain, the pure spirit he has done; it would have been common English beer.

Further, there is the best reason to believe that this disposition towards out-of-the-way subjects was inherited. His father is said, correctly enough, to have been a clerk in the Bank of England; but probably it was only the minor, that is, the mechanical half of him that was the clerk. The real Robert Browning, the self deep hidden at the core of the bank clerk, appears to have been something else. This I have indicated already. We all have to get our living in some way; and some of us get it in a way that we would gladly enough be quit of if we could. But fate is inexorable. For while "Man shall not live by bread alone," he shall certainly not live without bread—in this world at least. Hence we have to enslave ourselves. But when the working hours of each day end we are free; and then the true

man, the underlying self, the self that has been all day in bonds, comes to the front. And, judged by our recreations, an amazingly poor underlying self most of us have. The elder Robert Browning, however, apparently had not. Out of business hours he became scholar, poet, critic, connoisseur in art, and explorer in the by-paths of old world lore. His son said of him: "The old gentleman's brain was a storehouse of literary and philosophical antiquities. He was completely versed in mediæval legend, and seemed to have known Paracelsus, Faustus, and even Talmudic personages, personally." Upon which we remark, "Like father, like son." Also, that after this we have no difficulty in accounting for the Poet's choice of subjects, the choice was in his blood.

These subjects are to a great extent un-English. Browning was born in England, and wrote the English language, but most of what he wrote about had little intimate relation to his country or his countrymen. Is it a necessary inference that he was unpatriotic? I think not. We do not expect, and more, we do not desire a poet to be greatly interested in politics. If he is he will not be of much use as a poet. We have plenty of politicians, and of men purely insular, and purely modern, in their feeling; we want a few who will tell us something of what is outside these islands, and of what was before these times. Browning has done this; though he has done it in his own way; and there are few signs that in doing it he had an eye to teaching his contemporaries.

Or even to interesting them. He was for the most part simply pleasing himself, giving expression to himself, seeking to unfold himself, and turning to those things that would best help him in this. It may all appear very selfish. So many millions of ignorant and sorrowing, and not a thought about instructing or solacing them. Is it not selfish? Hardly. "To thine own self be true, and it must follow as the night the day thou canst not then be false to any man." The best service a man of original genius can do the world is simply to report himself, tell it what the inner eye and the inner ear have revealed to him of our common heritage, life. But he cannot do this to any good purpose unless he is left alone. We must not attempt to drive him or to hedge him in. Let him take his own free way through the world, in this direction or in that, hasting or resting, as the spirit moves him, like children among the flowers. For is not he also a child, a man possessing simplicity of heart, and freshness and innocence? which are the very qualities by which he becomes our teacher. Strip him of these and he is one of ourselves, a common man. On a certain occasion—was it a dinner party?—when Tennyson and some others were quizzing Browning upon his idiosyncrasies he quietly replied, "Well, people must just take me as I am." It was bravely and philosophically spoken; showing faith in himself, and showing an appreciation of individuality, that virtue Mill has advocated, almost passionately, in his essay on "Liberty."

Nearly all Browning's longest, most ambitious poems have a foreign connection; almost the only English thing about them is the language they are are written in. "Paracelsus" is foreign; so is "Sordello"—so foreign that notwithstanding Browning has written about him, they have not yet got him into the Encyclopædia Britannica. Poor little "Pippa," who passes and repasses to such purpose, is an Italian silk winder. And of his "Men and Women" not one except "Bishop Blougram" is English. The real characters among them are Johannes Agricola, a German reformer; Andrea Del Sarto, "The Faultless Painter"; and Fra Lippo Lippi, the not faultless in life,—he appears to have been fond of larking and the girls. Yet Browning has written a remarkable poem about him, full of beauty, suggestiveness and strength; inspired doubtless by his feeling of Lippi's greatness as an artist. Another real character is Geoffrey de Rudel, the Provence troubadour; and the lady he addresses himself to is a Countess of Tripoli. The fictitious characters are of a class with the real ones; they are Artemis the Greek godess; Karshish an Arab physician; and Cleon an imaginary poet, who writes a letter to an imaginary prince, both of them apparently Greek.

"The Inn Album," is altogether English; in scene, in incident, and in its characters, its *dramatis personæ;* and it contains some of the most sinewy passages Browning ever turned off his pen. It is a story of low intrigue, with the usual accompanying sensualisms,

and with darkest tragedy for ending; such as from time to time bursts forth in the life of what is called "Society." And it is founded upon facts; adverted to in *Notes and Queries* for March, 1876. Again, of the "Certain People" Browning "parleys" with, more than the half, five, are foreigners; three only are English; and these almost quite unknown to the general reading public. Only one of them has a place in the Encyclopædia Britannica.

"Fifine at The Fair," too, and "The Ring and The Book," poems of the greatest importance to Browning students, are also, both of them, foreign. It is at a French fair that Fifine the gipsy dancer shows off her limbs; and it is in Italy, at Rome and Arezzo, that the tragic true story of Pompilia the child wife, the victim of greed and ambition, unfolds itself.

A large proportion of Browning's shorter poems are of a piece with his larger ones, they also deal with the strange and the remote. In reading many of them we feel as if from home and far away, among an unknown people, listening to an unknown tongue, breathing an unknown atmosphere. This is not altogether pleasant. It does not give us the warmth and cheering and strength—the victory over life for the time being, that we crave from poetry; that poetry is so well fitted to give, and that it ought to give, and must give if it is to perform its mission. Now that religious belief is waning, poetry must more and more become our comforter.

"Where are most sorrows, there the poet's sphere is,
To feed the soul with patience,
To heal its desolations
With words of unshorn truth, with love that never wearies."

I am speaking, of course, in reference to the great majority of people, the staple of which humanity is made, when I say that Browning's poetry gives a far from home feeling. To the learned and travelled world it will probably give no such thing. But those who combine both learning and travel are the few; hence they must be the few who feel a ready-made acquaintance with Browning's themes, This as well as the jungle character of his style has operated against him.

These themes reveal an extraordinary range; they suggest a modern mind doing what a celebrated personage in the book of Job does, "going to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down in it." And with eyes too, whose "looks went everywhere," to use Browning's own phrase:

"This foot shall range
Alps, Andes,—and this eye devour
The bee-bird and the aloe flower."

It would almost seem as if it was his own foot and eye he is speaking of here, and that they had actually dreamed of doing the thing here suggested. It is "the wolfish hunger of knowledge" peeping out, the unresting desire for universal empire in the kingdom of mind, as Bonaparte had the desire for such empire in the kingdom of matter. This explains the vast

number, and the variety and unfamiliarity of his subjects ; he was a born resolute explorer, who must always be planting his foot upon new territory. Take, for instance, this passage, from one of his most beautiful, most pathetic works, his tragedy "Luria" ; which has this further merit, it is clearly expressed, no intelligent reader needs long previous discipline in Browning's style to appreciate it :

> "How inexhaustibly the spirit grows !
> One object she seemed erewhile born to reach
> With her whole energies and die content,—
> So like a wall at the world's end it stood,
> With nought beyond to live for,—is that reached ?
> Already are new undreamed energies
> Outgrowing under, and extending farther
> To a new object : there's another world."
>
> *Luria*, Act V.

This is a feeling we find asserting itself in all great literature, from the Preacher's confession "The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing" onward ; even, I suppose, before that. Every true poet rose with it somewhere about him, quiescent or active, this morning. There is no rest, no finality, never full and satisfying attainment. It appears to be an essential attribute of the soul. Philosophers say it is the expression of an infinite within us, and possibly they have said considerably more foolish things, if one dare criticize. Buddhists on the other hand allege—if I understand them—that it is a kind of primal curse cleaving to us ; and if we

put ourselves into their hands they will rid us of it; will lead us gently and surely, though by a long road, to "Nirvana," the cessation of desire. The sturdy Western soul, however, breathing energy from every pore, begs to be excused. Perhaps in its ignorance.

> "Look, the world tempts our eye,
> And we would know it all,
> We map the starry sky,
> We mine this earthen ball,
> We measure the sea tides, we number the sea sands;
>
> We scrutinize the dates
> Of long past human things,
> The bounds of effaced states,
> The lines of deceased kings;
> We search out dead men's words, and works of dead men's hands."[1]

There it is again, this longing to know, this daring heaven-scaling impulse, which has taken an oath that it will never let the human race rest. It turned Adam and Eve out of Paradise, and it has kept their descendants in the state of turmoil ever since. Wherever man is there it is, though it is only an individual here and there who has the genius to voice it. It killed Paracelsus; overdrove him till he lost his balance and self-command, and brought on a condition moral and physical that could issue only in death. It never overdrove Browning, however; his brain, his judgment, being large in proportion to his

[1] Matthew Arnold.

feeling. But it explains the vast tracts his intellect roamed over—the number and variety of his subjects; and also his going on till the end, till death took him; as he said early in life he would do:

> "I cannot chain my soul; it will not rest
> In its clay prison, this most narrow sphere:
> It has strange impulse, tendency, desire,
> Which nowise I account for nor explain,
> But cannot stifle, being bound to trust
> All feelings equally, to hear all sides." ("*Pauline*").

Browning had a decided predilection towards art and all things artistic. It came to him in the blood. We have seen that when customers went to the Bank of England his father would make sketches of them, often in caricature, and just for the fun of doing it. His collection of pictures, drawings and engravings appears to have been, for a private person in the middle rank of life, remarkable. The son inherited this taste; and so markedly that, "he was familiar," says his biographer, "to his early associates as a musician and artist rather than as a poet."

It is to be expected that this fondness for pictures, and the other forms of art would show itself in his poetry; as it does. We have a special manifestation of it in the poem "Old Pictures in Florence," which also gives us a peep at the kind of life Browning led in Italy—a restful, yet studious, meditative, dilettante life. He was absolutely unrestrained, he let his soul take its way. And there was everything around it to nourish its æsthetic sense, with the brightest of skies,

and "live translucent bath of air" to keep it exhilarated. Nature joined hands with art in ministering to it. No wonder Browning was an optimist.

"Old Pictures in Florence," however, is not striking as poetry. Neither does it spring upon us many, if any, new ideas; which, Nathaniel Hawthorne said, "are as heady as new wine." This constitutes their charm, and their real use as a saving influence in society—they keep the feeling of life-weariness, of satiety at bay. It is the special function of art whether in the form of poetry, painting, or sculpture to produce such ideas; and he who produces most of them, with most of nature in what he does produce, is as artist our greatest benefactor. Nature can never be exhausted. The man of genius knows this. It is only your learned imitator who fears that her wide domain has been already all explored, and that there is no more truth or beauty in her to set before the world.

> "While the world is left, while nature lasts,
> And man the best of nature, there shall be
> Somewhere contentment for these human hearts,
> Some freshness, some unused material
> For wonder and for song."*

I have said there are not many special ideas presented in "Old Pictures in Florence." However there is one; although it is not peculiar to Browning; not original in the sense that he was the first lone watcher on the heights of thought to discover it. It

* Lowell.

is the distinction, or difference between Greek art and Christian. Greek art gave itself to pourtraying, in idealistic fashion, the outward man, the body in which the soul is incarnate. It was the apotheosis of the body, a message to the world that this flesh and blood tabernacle of ours signifies more than meets the eye. It is divinely beautiful. To study its lines, its movements, its postures, the dignity expressed in its toute ensemble, and to worthily represent these, in marble or on canvas, for the world to look at, to love, aye and learn by, was work for genius. Having done this Greek art went no further. It never became sufficiently conscious of the invisible within the body, that which gives it form and expression, the glamour of beauty, to feel drawn to it as a subject. To set forth this invisible, to paint the soul through the flesh—"fraying" the flesh, that the soul might manifest itself—was left for the art of the Church. It cared not for the body, even despised the body, presenting it in emaciation and sadness, that it might

> "Bring the visible full into play,
> Let the invisible go to the dogs—what matters?"

Then Browning shows how much more expansive Christian art necessarily is than Greek; which is owing to its subject being the inward man, the soul, while Greek art's subject was the body. And what a far mightier, more prolonged labour, running on through æons, endless as the soul itself, it takes to represent the former than the latter.

"Growth came when looking your last on them all (all the Greek statues and sculptures)

> You turned your eyes inwardly one fine day
> And cried with a start—What if we so small
> Be greater and grander the while than they?"

So much for the most outstanding idea in "Old Pictures in Florence." There is something else, however, that may interest the hero-worshipper of Browning, viz., an indication of his political feeling. Monarchy, he says:

> "Ever its uncouth cub licks
> Out of the bear's shape into Chimaera's,
> While Pure Art's birth is still the republic's."

Then he has a prevision of Giotto's Campanile being finished, some day in the future, when devotion to art has come to life again in the soul of Italy:

> "Shall, I be alive that morning the scaffold
> Is broken away, and the long-pent fire,
> Like the golden hope of the world, unbaffled
> Springs from its sleep, and up goes the spire
> While "God and the People" plain for its motto,
> Thence the new tricolour flaps at the sky?
> At least to forsee that glory of Giotto
> And Florence together, the first am I."

"God and the people," and the tricolour, which have given so many worthy souls the tremors, appear to have been lovable to Browning.

It is not, however, for any abstract idea, however important, that I have introduced this poem; it is for

the light it throws upon its author. It shows us a man not only animated but dominated by the artistic impulse. Historians say of William the Conqueror that he loved the tall deer as if he had been their father; as seen here Browning loves old pictures as if he had been their creator, the man whose brush had brought them into being. He thinks of them as living things; several of them as things once alive but now dead; for, neglected through centuries they have peeled away from the walls where the hand of genius had put them; till now no trace of them is left. Yes, there may be a trace of some. Here and there, in some little visited church, this or that art treasure commonly accounted lost, worn away to nothingness, may be living yet. And Browning goes prying about Florence with the hope in his heart that he may discover such. He reproaches the ghosts of the old masters—whom he imagines perambulating the city on the same quest—for not employing him to help them:

"When they go at length, with such a shaking
Of heads o'er the old delusion, sadly
Each master his way through the black streets taking
Where many a lost work breathes though badly—
Why don't they bethink them of who has merited?
Why not reveal while their pictures dree
Such doom, how a captive might be outferreted?
Why is it they never remember me?"

He had a claim to be remembered; for he was not among the disinterested, the Gallios who cared

for none of these things. He had been a loving, earnest student of them and their works, and could flatter himself that he knew somewhat:

> "But at any rate I have loved the season
> Of Art's spring birth so dim and dewy;
> My sculptor is Nicolo the Pisan,
> My painter—who but Cimabue?
> Nor ever was man of them all indeed,
> From these to Ghiberti and Ghirlandajo,
> Could say that he missed my critic meed.
> So now to my special grievance—heigh ho!"

It will not be necessary to return to this quality of Browning's mind; this strong, deep-seated, ever-present, ever-active love of art that pervaded him. Having had the means to indulge it it helped greatly to make him happy. We must put down no small portion of his optimism to this. The world was beautiful not only for its skies and flowers, but for the wonderful things man the creator had made; which "his great shaping hands" had fashioned, and his soul breathed the breath of life into. Browning was enabled to feel all this. Given his tastes, and what a life that of his in Italy, amid the art glories ot the past, must have been; and may be yet to all who are like him, and like circumstanced. We perceive how he sang:

> "God's in his heaven—
> "All's right with the world."

Browning is less widely known for his love and knowledge of art than for his gift of psychological

analysis, of soul dissection. When he comes to the study of a man he pierces through and looks inside him to the internal forces, to the thoughts, passions, affections which shape the outward life, determining that awe-striking thing our destiny. Nothing in all the world, not even art, interested him like these. He has said so himself. In his dedication of that chaotic poem, standing solitary in its disorder, "Sordello," he says:

> "My stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul! little else is worth study. I, at least, always thought so—you, with many known and unknown to me, think so—others may one day think so."

Which possibly they will, though it is doubtful if the almost unreadable "Sordello" will help them to this. I am not going to attempt here an analysis and estimate of this poem; which could not be done briefly, not to say easily, and which goes beyond the limits I have allowed myself for these lectures. But "Sordello" is meant to be a history of the growth and development of a poet; in this case a very self-conscious poet, who alas! ends tragically. It is a veritable jungle, through which the reader has to hew his way as with axe and stubhoe; getting often entangled, held fast as in a vice as he does so. I think that not even a man of genius had the right to offer the public such an insult as was involved in the publication of "Sordello." It was like gathering stones and mortar into a heap and shouting, "There's your house for you!" The author evidently had not

learned his trade of author. Or he had forgotten it ; the strength and skill shown in "Paracelsus" had been spirited away ; for while he toils and sweats like a giant in "Sordello," it is like a giant untrained. And blind. He has encumbered himself with too much material, especially too many details, more than he can handle with power and masterliness. And the result is what all Browning students know, and what many of them lament.

There are several other poems in which Browning shows his psychological and analytic bent ; his love of tracking a soul through its many windings on to the consummation of its destiny. The one of greatest magnitude is, of course, "The Ring and The Book ;" but "Turf and Towers" is a notable example of the same ; and more notable still is the "Inn Album." This last was published when Browning was sixty-three years of age, and never did his genius show more resplendent than it does here. Never such fire, intensity, athletic diction as in the fifth act of this sordid drama ; when fate brings together the two lovers (who were no lovers) and they set to and abuse each other. There was never such a spitting out of fierce words from man to woman and from woman to man ; words fierce yet fitting, as polished as keen, no coarseness. It is an encounter between fox and she wolf ; man turned to fox by the baseness of his life, woman turned to she wolf by her wrongs. And the she-wolf has the better of it, if better of it there be. I said in my last lecture that Browning

possessed no passion; but when I think of this encounter, and of the parts following it, I almost feel inclined to take back my words. If he had himself no passion he understood passion in others, and could give fitting, strong expression to it; which is all that in a poet is required. I can hardly give a sample in proof; for to take a passage from its context and set it by itself would be to do it wrong. But here are some descriptive lines, which show how unimpaired at sixty three Browning's powers were:

"See
The low wide brow oppressed by sweeps of hair
Darker and darker as they coil and swathe
The crowned corpse—wanness whence the eyes burn black.

Not asleep now! not pin-points dwarfed beneath
Either great bridging eyebrow—poor blank beads—
Babies, I've pleased to pity in my time;
How they protrude and grow immense with hate!
The long triumphant nose attains—retains
Just the perfection; and there's scarlet-skein
My ancient enemy, her lip and lip,
Sense-free, sense-frighting lips clenched cold and bold.

Because of chin, that based resolve beneath!
Then the columnar neck completes the whole
Greek-sculpture-baffling body!"

And take this strong, proud line:

"The lady's proud, pale queenliness of scorn."

And this one:

"You stand stout, strong in the rude health of hate."

Also this:

"To end she looks the large, deliberate look."

And these two lines:

"In every love, or soon or late,
Soul must awake and seek out soul for soul."

The mind whose smelting fires could forge stuff like these was not in its decadence.

Browning never shows himself a man who is lacking in courage; on the contrary he possessed of this more than his share, a born strong wrestler and soldier he.

"I was ever a fighter,"

he says, in that brave, buoyant short poem, "Prospice," written after his wife's death, while he was still under the shadow. And this fighting—would it be too savage to say, Berserkir?—spirit lived in him to the last.

"One who never turned his back, but marched breast forward,
Never doubted clouds would break,
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph,
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
Sleep to wake."

"No, at noonday in the bustle of man's work time,
Greet the unseen with a cheer!
Bid him forward, breast and back as either should be,
'Strive and thrive!' cry 'Speed,—fight on, fare ever
There as here!'"

Having written this Browning laid down his pen and wrote no more; it is his last will and testimony. "God's finger touched him, and he slept."

In his courage Browning did not fear to express himself on a subject that has always been a thorny one, and that is specially set round with thorns at the present time, religion. Matthew Arnold has a complaint that,

"The kings of modern thought are dumb;
Silent they are, though not content,
And wait to see the future come.
They have the grief men had of yore
But they contend and cry no more."

By which he means, that they refuse to let out their mind for the leading of him and the like of him who are in perplexity.

They may have a very good reason for this. When a man can tell nothing to himself, to enlighten and comfort himself, how shall he tell something to his neighbour? "Speech is silvern," it has been said, "silence is golden." At certain stages in the development of thought, and upon certain subjects of thought silence is particularly golden. When we have nothing to say it is best to say nothing. The

human spirit eager to forge ahead must perforce pause at intervals and let time work; time that in its "unhasting, unresting" way will remove from its path barriers it cannot by a *tour-de-force* remove for itself. There may be the best of reasons for the kings of modern thought being dumb; reasons rooted in the economy of Nature; who has her laws that she works by, and which she will not throw over for our whining.

But Browning was not among the dumb. He was a man of positive convictions and spoke out. In one of his poems he has a prayer:

> "God help all poor souls lost in the dark!"

which was far from applicable to himself. He had light within him, and it was all light about him, his way was clear; and when eventide came it was still light. Blessed! was he not?

He has given his religious opinions in his poems; not, however, as the philosopher or dogmatist gives such, but as the man of imagination, the poet does. "Christmas Eve," and "La Saisiaz" are devoted wholly to this subject; and we get broad hints in "Ferishtah's Fancies;" which are his final summing up and verdict, as it were, upon life. In a future lecture I shall return to what Browning has to say about religion.

V.

BROWNING AND RELIGION.

I.

It is not too much to say that religion has always been of absorbing—sometimes even of impassioned interest to man. He has fought for it as stoutly as ever he fought for commercial rights and privileges; and he has fought for it with more passion in his heart. It is all over his history as odours are over a summer garden; but it has not always been a sweet odour that religion has exhaled. Sometimes it has been a sour, a bitter one. Yet has not man cast it from him as an evil thing, a relic of the age when he wore paint and feathers. It is with us still. It is here in this young century, with its triumphant industrialism, its militarism, its luxury, its mammon-worship, its learning, its science, and its free-thinking scientific spirit.

But religion has changed. It is not now the fiery spirit it once was. It has learned wisdom from its defeats. It has withdrawn its claim to be sole interpreter and sovereign of the destinies of man. Some of the watchmen on the heights of thought say it is

just now in a peculiarly anaemic condition. The late Mr. Froude was one of these. Mr. Froude maintained all through his life an interest, perhaps a morbid one, in this question of religion ; and he saw, or thought he saw, that all along the line faith was decadent. "In every corner of the world," he says, "there is the same phenomenon of the decay of established religions. . . . Among Mohammedhans, Jews, Buddhists, Brahmins traditionary creeds are losing their hold. An intellectual revolution is sweeping over the world, breaking down established opinions, on which historical faiths have been built up." The late Matthew Arnold has lines to a similar effect. He was a kind of male Cassandra, with a fine genius for seeing the dark side, the man to let loose among a crowd of optimists :

"The sea of faith
Was once too at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy long withdrawing roar
Retreating to the breath
Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world."

The amount of non-churchgoing that prevails is a confirmation of the historian and the poet. Of this non-churchgoing there are two kinds, that which springs from indifferentism, and is found among the masses, and that which springs from scepticism, and is found among the classes. But the latter does

not necessarily mean the decay of religion. It may mean the opposite. May it not mean that those classes, the self-excommunicated from the churches, have laid down the religion of the letter and taken up the greater religion of the spirit? They have paid-off the priest and fallen back upon the witness within, the soul. And their own soul, not another's. This is what it comes to with all the intellectually alive at last. As we shall see, it is what it came to with Browning; upon his "lone soul" he took his firm and final stand:

> "Soul's self soul's only master here
> Alike from first to last." ("Fifine at the Fair")

The soul above creeds! The soul above churches! The soul above books! The soul above all external authority!—that is what the poet means. And that, or something like it, is religious progress. And the decay that periodically overtakes creeds and churches, which some people have no more sense than to lament, is part of this progress. God leaves His ancient place by the altar, and finds a new sanctuary for Himself in our hearts. The ecclesiastical organisation becomes of less consequence, the individual becomes of more. The priest and his artifices are pushed into the back-ground, the man in his rights of a man comes to the front. The services are in the vernacular, and the theology is the profound simple truths which the soul brooding on its destiny naturally evolves.

There is one drawback, however, and a serious one, they are only the few who can participate in

this progress; for they are only the few who have a natural genius for religion; i.e., for feeling the Unseen, and vitally relating themselves to it. To the great majority of men the Unseen is simply a hearsay; they do not deny it, but it is not to them a real thing, brooding over them,

"A master o'er a slave,
A Presence which is not to be put by."

I doubt if there is any means at the command of man by which they can be helped. The mystic, or religious man, is like the poet, born not made. St. Paul knew this, or something in him knew it, when he said, "By the grace of God I am what I am." And how profound are the words of our Lord: "Blessed art thou, Simon Barjonah; for flesh and blood—i.e., philosophy, logic—hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven." The higher wisdom can be communicated only to the elect, to them who have a predilection for it, in whom its germ already is.

"Nay be assured; no secret can be told
To any who divined it not before;
None uninitiate by many a presage
Will comprehend the language of the message,
Altho' proclaimed aloud for evermore."

It is true. It is specially true of the secrets of soul life; those emotions that come to us we know not whence, but that are the most real of realities, the truest of truths. That they are so we have the strongest proof possible, the strongest proof in all the world, the testimony of our consciences.

II.

A poet who gives himself to the study of religion is always an interesting person, and such a poet was Browning. He is doubly interesting in an age like the present, when the old is dying or dead and the new is not yet born. Some are even mournfully asking, "Will there ever be a new? Will the ancient magician that so long ruled our hearts, now to fear, now to hope, rise from his grave and charm again? Will he come back as the spring comes back? Will he sway the sceptre once more? Shall we feel over us his benignant power?"

In dealing with religion a man like Browning has a great advantage over the professional theologian, the advantage that liberty of prophesying possesses over prophesying in bonds. His mind is free to take its own way and come to its own conclusion without fear of consequences. With the clergy it is not so; there is one particular conclusion they must come to or suffer; they must obey orders or be cast out. So they refrain from inquiry altogether, missing the fine fascination of it; or, like Renan's country priest, they inquire and keep silent. And what a silence! What a price it costs them! They go about with firm closed lips, half dazed, miserably devouring their hearts. In all the world could there be a heavier cross-bearing than this, than having live thought shut up in your mind as in a prison? Always shut up, beat as it may at the bars for utterance. It is one of the things that ruin men.

This being so the world has learned not to look to

the church for aid in an intellectual crisis, when the hour for a new revelation has struck. The trumpet of destiny sounds, bidding the world move forward, but the paralytic church sits still, warm in her seat and contented. Browning knew this, and has alluded to it sarcastically in his poem "The Ring and The Book:"

> "Ah but, religion, did we wait for thee
> To ope the book, that serves to sit upon,
> And pick such place out, we should wait indeed!
> That is all history."

This is a-propos of putting refractory witnesses under torture: which the world, not the church, abrogated in the end. As long as man was unredeemed, a barbarian, coarse-minded, callous-hearted, the church let him follow the vile practice. Never a protest from her.

> "Prim in place Religion overlooked,
> And so had done till Doomsday, never a sign
> Nor sound of interference from her mouth."

But at last "the burly slave" ceased torturing of himself. He outgrew his barbarism, felt ashamed of what he had been doing, and did it no more. Then the church smiled her approval; and, as is her way, took credit for being coadjutor with "the burly slave" in the reform.

> "What, broken is the rack? well done of thee!
> Did I forget to abrogate its use?
> Be the mistake in common with us both!
> One more fault our blind age shall answer for,
> Down in my book tho' it must be
> Somewhere. Henceforth find truth by milder means."

This shows what is always instructive, the attitude of a mind like Browning's towards the great ecclesiastical tradition, the Church; an institution so venerable, so massive, so worldly-wise, and, as the result of her worldly-wisdom, so powerful still.

But Browning was by no means an iconoclast. The man who conceived and drew "Bishop Blougram" could not be such. He saw too wide about him for that: he saw that no Church or sect has a monopoly of the truth; and that so long as there is the People there must be a religion for the People. This will be better supervised by a worldly-wise man like Blougram —never mind the free-thinking—than by a fire-eating fanatic. When "Blougram" first appeared he was said to be drawn from Cardinal Wiseman, with what truth I know not. Not with much I can believe. For "Blougram" represents a type, a class, rather than an individual. In all the churches there are "Blougrams"; men of practical insight, and the large prudence that cares less for doctrines than for the successful management of human nature—that mixed quantity; men who love the good things of life—wine after dinner, place, influence, honour, the wearing of vestments, not to speak of the money that procures those delectable things; and men who judge that the simple act of keeping quiet is not too high a price to pay for them —especially when there is so little they can tell.

III.

In considering what Browning has to say about religion we must remember that he is a poet. And we must remember also that the poet approaches a subject differently from the practical man or the man of science. He approaches it rather through feeling than through logic. He has not the itch for system-making, which is so characteristic of theologians, and which has so often led them to

"Make of Thought's own substance a cage for Thought
And lock truth fast with her own master key."

He knows better than to let himself have a part in that business—God has taught him better. The most brand new "Plan of the Universe," just patented and warranted, this one, to be perfect, does not take him in. Alas! there have been so many plans, and all have proved failures: the biggest of them not big enough for life and the world.

"Our little systems have their day,
They have their day, and cease to be:
They are but broken lights of thee,
And Thou, O Lord, art more than they."

But to be a broken light of the Infinite is something! Is it not a great deal? This the most fanatical enemy of those systems, if in himself there be light, will admit. It is what makes every stratum of human thought from the first wakening of human life important. In the savage superstition, in the mysteries of the Nile worship, in the Gods of Babylonia, in Jehovah,

in Romish creed and ritual, there is light for us if we can catch it. Browning has the same idea as Tennyson, which he expresses with a tenderness not common with him:

"Of all the lamentable debts incurred
By man thro' buying knowledge, this were worst:
That he should find his last gain prove his first
Was futile—merely nescience absolute,
Not knowledge in the bud,—
* * * * * * *
But ignorance, a blur to wipe
From human records, late it graced so much,
Truth—this attainment? Ah, but such and such
Beliefs of yore seemed inexpugnable
When we attained them! E'en as they so will
This their successor have the due morn, noon,
Evening, and night—just as an old-world tune
Wears out and drops away, until who hears
Smilingly questions—This it was brought tears
Once to all eyes,—this roused heart's rapture once?
So will it be with truth that, for the nonce,
Styles itself truth perennial: 'ware its wile!
Knowledge turns nescience,—foremost in the file,
Simply proves first of our delusions."

He has the same thought in "Fifine," given with even more emphasis, if more emphasis be possible. The one voice "which failed never," which never was found false, preached only this—mark what it did preach!

> "Truth builds upon the sands,
> Tho' stationed on a rock: and so her work decays,
> And so she builds afresh with like result. Nought stays
> But just the fact that Truth not only is, but fain
> Would have men know she needs must be, by each so plain
> Attempt to visibly inhabit where they dwell."

It is the profoundest of sermons. Two points in it require attention; first, that Truth is stationed on a rock, *i.e.*, she herself is eternal, she changes not, the same yesterday, to-day and for ever. But second, her works are ephemeral, and meant to be such; therefore she bases them, and purposely bases them, on the most shifting of all foundations, the sand. They can serve at most but two or three generations, and must be so framed as to pass away. For change is the law of the Cosmos, and Truth must accommodate her work to this law; she must build such structures as will last for a short period only, as will shelter and nourish man through a few stages, but only through a few stages of his life-journey.

> "Her works are work, while she is she; that work does well
> Which lasts mankind their lifetime thro', and lets believe,
> One generation more, that, tho' sand run thro' sieve,
> Yet earth now reached is rock, and what we moderns find
> Erected here is truth, who 'stablished to her mind
> I' the fulness of the days, will never change in show
> More than in substance erst: Men thought they knew; we know."

Ah yes! How favoured we are, we moderns, we the knowing ones! Truth absolute has come at last,

now, while we are here, in the fulness of time, according to prophecy. And the old religions were but stopgaps, fables. The simple people who believed them were dupes ; the more dupes that they thought they knew. But we, ah ! we are different ; we are the lucky ones ; we do know ; not in fancy but in fact, calm, majestic fact. Heaven has been good to us !

It is thus man *must* think about his creed if it is to be of service to him. The illusion must be perfect, deep-rooted in his conscience and his heart, with no trait to hint that it is an illusion. Given such a trait, and the spell is broken. The creed becomes "a creed outworn," and the soul suckling it must look for a new mother from whose breasts to draw life. Change, a flowing, a metamorphosis, that is the eternal law ; which the poet is more alive to, Emerson says, than ordinary men. He "perceives that thought is multiform ; that within the form of every creature (of every creed we may add) is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form." Browning saw this truth also. He saw not only that the old departs but that the new comes, as orderly and beautifully as the wild flowers in their seasons. In the next verse of this poem, "Fifine," he says so. Referring to the assertion of us moderns that we know, he sarcastically asks, "Do you my generation ?" Then he goes on : as sure as the old form of truth decays a fresh form takes its place. For nature abhors a vacuum ; and shape will be reshaped till out of shapelessness comes shape again.

"Or round or square
Or polygon its front, some building will be there,
Do duty in that nook o' the wall o' the world where once
The Architect saw fit precisely to ensconce
College or Church, and bid such bulwark guard the line
O' the barrier round about, humanity's confine."

Such is the doctrine, It runs through all Browning's works; always when there is occasion he brings it to the front. It is one of the children of his affections; like his doctrine of failure, rather of non-failure, of ample and true success always to the brave.

This doctrine of sameness in difference, of oneness in diversity—truth ever the same its form only changing, has a great practical lesson. It teaches that while men were disputing about what they called truth—shedding each other's blood for it, going to the stake for it—they were disputing only about its vesture. Ignorant, they did not perceive this. Neither did they perceive that the vesture—this, that, or the other vesture—would, like their body's clothes, be in fashion only for a time. And that the gulf dividing the peasant's faith—call it if you like superstition—from the philosopher's is small. Therefore one of Browning's *dramatis personæ* says wisely: "A philosopher's life is spent in discovering that of the half dozen truths he knew when a child, such an one is a lie, as the world states it in set terms; and then after a weary lapse of years, and plenty of hard thinking, it becomes a truth again after all, as he happens to newly consider it and view it in a different

relation with the others: and so he restates it to the confusion of somebody else in good time. As for adding to the original stock of truths—impossible. Thus you see the expression of them is the grand business." Here it is again, in a different dress:

> "Food o' the soul, the stuff that's made
> To furnish man with thought and feeling, is purveyed
> Substantially the same from age to age, with change
> Of the outside only for successive feasters."

Such philosophy is all on the side of the "Blougrams," who follow expediency, not without side glances at the loaves and fishes. And this is the evil element in it. But it is also—and this is the good element in it—on the side of Renan's country priest, the worthy soul who "through his solitary studies and the simple purity of his life comes to a knowledge of the impossibilities of literal dogmatism; but refuses to sadden those whom he formerly consoled, and explain to the simple folk those changes of belief which they could not well comprehend. Heaven forbid!" Yes, Heaven forbid! "Will ever," adds Renan, "those whose duty it is to speak equal, after all, in merit, those who in secret cherished and restrained the doubts known only to God?" And here Tennyson's sweet lines come floating to me:

> "Leave thou thy sister when she prays
> Her early heaven her happy views,
> Nor thou with shadowed hint confuse
> A life that leads melodious days."

Three quarters of a century ago, before this doctrine had become fashionable, Carlyle acted upon it in his talks with his mother. The two of them, mother and son, would sit down by the fire, light their pipes, and talk about theology—a subject that in those days the Scottish peasant loved. It was after the son had seceded from the family faith and gone wandering in the wilderness; and his mother, as a fond mother will, feared he might be "lost." He tried to reassure her, to quiet her agitations. "They were of the same faith still," he said, "the only difference was in their way of putting it, in substance they were one." Did she believe it, did she take it all in? Rather *could* she take it all in, this that her beloved son told her? I know not. I guess and fear. For the untrained mind does not easily distinguish between the form and the substance; does not even perceive that they are two things; it regards them as one and indivisible.

And truth is not only a unity but a fixed unity, the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever, which no man can tamper with save at his soul's peril. This is the peasant's faith, every untrained mind's faith, passionately held, the world over. I have said they hold this faith, but rather it holds them, and they cannot disentangle themselves from it. Let the educated thinker note this and be patient. He views religion from the mountain tops of thought, and necessarily sees it different from the lowly dwellers in the vale, who plough and reap that he may meditate. He

should be grateful to them; he should hold them in reverence; and when he speaks of religion he should speak not only like a philosopher but like a man, with tenderness towards his "hardly entreated brother," his "conscript on whom the lot fell." Those learned who make a way into the souls of the humble, and use their learning to ravage these souls, stealing away their treasures, their faith and hope, do immense wrong.

IV.

One feature of Browning's poetry to be mentioned in connection with his religion is its agnosticism. It states this doctrine with iteration, now in one form, now in another, but always with emphasis; never hesitatingly or weakly. An agnostic is simply a person who says, "I do not know;" yet he is looked upon with suspicion. He is going to steal away our beliefs, we fear, as the burglar is going to steal our spoons if he can. Such is our feeling. It may be due partly to the fact that the term agnostic had for its inventor a man—Professor Huxley—who from the standpoint of the traditional theology was "a suspect." From such a man no good could come; we "do not gather grapes of thorns nor figs of thistles."

This feeling, this idea of the unknown is a strange thing. And as unpleasant as strange; it wakens awe within us, it chills our heart, it confouuds our understanding; well if it does not go further and take moral effort out of our lives. For what can we do when it is all dark about us,

"No a star in a' the carry?"

What can we be, but

"Children crying in the night,
And with no language but a cry?"

It is thus we feel in our extremity. But courage! The soul never yet was in a corner but sooner or later it found its way out. It has been precisely by getting itself into corners, and fighting itself out of them that it has become strong; and although its way may be dark now for a little, it will walk in paths of peace, with the great blue over it, again. Man fain would know. He comes with the desire of knowledge in his blood. I am not sure but before he grew to be a man, in some pre-human state, (taking Darwin for granted) it was there. You have seen how a colt turned into a paddock for the first time is restless till he has gone round it, and gained some knowledge of the new world into which he has come. The instinct to know, I believe, is one of the ancient things upon this ancient earth. In man it becomes self-conscious and attains to strength; to such strength in a few select souls that it may well be described in Browning's words as a "wolfish hunger." The myths, fables, cosmogonies, revelations of the fore-world are all its outcome. Omar Khayyam does not show deep philosophy when he writes:

"The Revelations of Devout and Learned
Who rose before us, and as Prophets burned,
Are all but stories which, awoke from sleep,
They told their comrades, and to sleep returned."

But for those revelations what would have become of our dark minded ancestor? In heaven's name what would have become of him? Could he ever have attained to be a man? The soul simply must know, or think it knows, and it must live by what it knows, if it would make progress. One feature of man's character as a knower is this, as he advances he becomes less certain of his knowledge, and less convinced that it is great. This is because his sense of the world's vastness grows, and seizes him more deeply. He is already a long way forward when he exclaims, in the sublime language of Job:

> "Canst thou by searching find out God?
> Canst thou find out the Almighty unto
> perfection? It is as high as heaven; what
> canst thou do? deeper than hell what canst
> thou know?"

And to find the agnostic spirit in a man like Browning, a man pre-eminently gifted, learned, thoughtful, ceaselessly inquiring, and a modern man, is what we would expect. Take a few passages in which this spirit has voiced itself. There are many such passages in the poems, but I shall give only two or three, almost at random.

> "I know as much of any will of God
> As knows some dumb and tortured brute what Man,
> His stern lord, wills from the perplexing blows
> That plague him every way."

Certainly it is Paracelsus who says this; but Browning is less a dramatist than a monodramatist, and himself, under whatever name, is generally the *dramatis personæ.* Shakespeare does not let himself be seen through his characters, but Browning often does. Besides, this sentiment of nescience runs through, as I have said, many of his works, pervading them as a flavour. It becomes particularly strong towards the close of his life, when he wrote "Ferishtah's Fancies;" which have been called Browning's "mellow wisdom." They are a summing up of the lessons his long strenuous career had taught him, a solemn affidavit made before he stepped off the stage. In one of them he says:

> "Were knowledge all thy faculty, then God
> Must be ignored."

Could Herbert Spencer desire more?

> "Enjoy the present gift, nor wait to know
> The unknowable."

That is sound practical advice, with the ring of the man of the world in it; but who of us will follow it? Who of us *can* follow it, before we have struggled and suffered, and in the end run up against the unknowable, even as the Poet did? We all want to find out for ourselves, we will take nobody's word for it. And rightly so. "Prove all things," is the Eternal God's-message to His creature man.

In the "Fancy" called "A Bean Stripe," there is mention of

"A power confessed past knowledge, nay past thought,
Thus thought thus known!"

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

"To know of, think about—
Is all man's sum of faculty effects
When exercised on earth's least atom, son!
What was, what is, what may such atom be?
No answer."

As the High Priest Caiaphas said, "What further need have we of witnesses?" We cannot know even earth's least atom; we only know *of* it, know that it exists, that here, at a certain point of space, is a thing we have agreed to call an atom. No more. This is the end of it all, of all our high striving. The mountain has laboured, and it has brought forth a mouse. Where is cause for intellectual pride?

The sentiments just quoted are inconsistent with a theology, a religious doctrinal system, and we find that Browning, like poets generally, had none. If he had he took a strange pleasure in concealing it, he was not honest. In treating this lack of a theology let us begin, so to speak, at the beginning; which we shall find in the "Parleying" with Charles Avison, a poem on music. It goes thus—the quotation must be a longish one:

"Soul," (accept
A word which vaguely names what no adept
In word-use fits and fixes so that still
Thing shall not slip words' fetter and remain
Innominate as first, yet, free again,
Is no less recognised the absolute
Fact underlying that same other fact
Concerning which no cavil can dispute
Our nomenclature when we call it Mind—
Something not matter)—"Soul" who seeks shall find
Distinct beneath that something. You exact
An illustrative image? This may suit."

VII.

"We see a work: the worker works behind,
Invisible himself. Suppose his act
Be to o'erarch a gulf: he digs, transports,
Shapes and, thro enginery—all sizes, sorts,
Lays stone by stone until a floor compact
Proves our bridged causeway. So works Mind—by stress
Of faculty, with loose facts, more or less,
Builds up our solid knowledge: all the same,
Underneath rolls what Mind may hide not tame,
An element which works beyond our guess,
Soul, the unsounded sea—whose lift of surge,
Spite of all superstructure, lets emerge,
In flower and foam, Feeling from out the deeps
Mind arrogates no mastery upon—
Distinct indisputably."

The vagueness of Browning's style, so often charged against him, serves the end well here ; for how can we be other than vague in speaking of so great a mystery as the "Soul ?" We cannot even come near to defining it ; as easily could we paint the hues of a wild bird flashing past us. We are hardly even conscious of its existence. Of mind, of intellect, we are conscious, but not of "Soul." It underlies mind, Browning says, an "unsounded sea," whose waters pour through us in mystery. A sufficiently mystical statement, this, but therein lies its merit. There is "Soul" in us, something vaster than mind, more God-like, far more inconceivable, not to be caught by words; the source, it, of our unreasoned and unreasonable aspirations, our presentiments, our dim descryings, our hopes and fears that cannot be uttered, all the inexplicable phenomena of our nature. This is all we can say:

"Yet again, lo! the soul above all science."

Walt. Whitman's pregnant line. Upon which we may rest, as upon the soundest philosophy of the Soul to be obtained, yet which is no philosophy.

V.

We have now reached a point at which it might seem that man, so far as religion is concerned, has been left forlorn. There is no voice to instruct him, no outstretched hand to help him, no light kindled anywhere upon his path. He is alone, and it is a desert in which he is alone. So it might appear. But it is not so. Things are never so bad as they

look, and they are not so bad here. True, reason has proved her weakness in the affairs of the Soul; but there is a greater than reason, a far more heavenly faculty that now comes forward to help. This is Faith; of which we may say that "she cometh down as a bride out of heaven adorned for her bridegroom," the Soul. And she is winged. And she leads the Soul upward. And reason has no part in the business, except as a kind of mechanic who strikes off the Soul certain chains. Always in religious history reason's chief work has been that of the iconoclast, the destroyer; when dogmas had grown grey it arose and gave them notice to quit. The popular aversion to the rationalist is well founded; all his work is negative, he can pull down, but he cannot build up, he can destroy but he cannot create; and had he everything his own way he would make for the Soul a bleak, desolate world.

What does Browning mean by faith? He says quite explicitly what he means, as explicitly as in a matter of this subtle kind is possible. In "Easter Eve," for instance:

> "A scientific faith's absurd."

Why so? Because a scientific faith is a contradiction in terms, science and faith mutually excluding each other. Science deals with fact, certainty; faith with uncertainty, with things of which reason and the senses have no cognizance. We require the state of doubt, mental suspension, improbability, strain, stress, heaped

up difficulties, soul-searchings, for faith to get her hand in and do her work. She is a sixth sense that comes to our aid when all the other senses fail us. Browning handles the subject at length in "Bishop Blougram," but there is not time to go over that very clever and suggestive poem. The Bishop's defence of himself may be put in a sentence; it is that unbelief is quite as difficult as belief, and for himself he prefers the latter, as being better not only for body but for soul. It gives him the good things of this life; while to others it has given much more—to Luther, for instance:

> "A real heaven in his heart throughout his life."

You think you can settle down an infidel, do you, unchanging, calm? the eye kept steadily earthward, the inward commotion gone, the peace of death taken its place? You are mistaken. It is not in human nature:

> "Just when we are safest, there's a sunset touch,
> A fancy from a flower bell, some one's death,
> A chorus-ending from Euripides,—
> And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears
> As old and new at once as nature's self,
> To rap and knock, and enter in our soul,
> Take hands and dance there, a fantastic ring,
> Round the ancient idol, on his base again—
> The grand perhaps!"

Love is a prominent element in the religion of the New Testament, and it is a prominent element in the

religion of Browning. And being the optimist he was he had, of course, Hope. Therefore in his religion we have got the great trio, Faith, Hope, and Love; which dwelling in our hearts make life successful under whatever circumstances, and great, and sweet. Take these lines:

> "Were knowledge all thy faculty, then God
> Must be ignored: Love gains him by first leap."

That is, the affirmations of the heart must be put above the negations of the understanding. A thought that is more definitely expressed in the following:

> "Wholly distrust thy knowledge, then, and trust
> As wholly love allied to ignorance."

And if any one wants success, which we all do want, here is the road to it:

> "Love—trust to! Be rewarded for the trust
> In trust's mere act. In love success is sure.
> Attainment—no delusion, whatsoe'er
> The prize be: apprehended as a prize
> A prize it is."

The above are from "Ferishtah's Fancies;" which have been called, as we have seen, Browning's "mellow wisdom"; his mind threw them off when it was full ripe.

There is a problem that has sorely exercised man from the beginning of his self-conscious history, and about it also Browning says something, and something definite. This is the problem of his immortality. "If a man die shall he live again?" It is a terrible

question, with which for thousands of years fervid souls have wrestled. And if ever the angels turn and look upon it they must see it stained with tears. To this question Browning has an answer; not one that he would force upon others, but one that, seeking, he found for himself. It is, yes. And a hearty yes. He talks no affected nonsense about joining

> "The choir invisible
> Whose music is the gladness of the world."

That was a cant which forty years ago, under the high-priesthood of Comte, seized certain people of genius both here and abroad. And it enthrals some of them still. They did not care to live after death, they said, not they. They were above such selfishness. They saw a greater heaven than we, common folk, aspire to; and it was this, to

> "Be to other souls
> The cup of strength in some great agony,
> Enkindle generous ardour, feed pure love,
> Beget the smiles that have no cruelty—
> Be the sweet presence of a good diffused.
> And in diffusion ever more intense."
>
> . . . . . .
> . . . . . .
>
> "This is life to come,
> Which martyr'd men have made more glorious
> For us who strive to follow."
>
> (Geo. Eliot: "Jubal and Other Poems.")

I cannot understand this sentiment as other than a forced growth. I understand Browning better. He

speaks out strongly, even fiercely, the natural feelings of the heart:

> "Truly there needs another life to come!
> If this be all—(I must tell Festus that)
> And other life await us not—for one
> I say 't is a poor cheat, a stupid bungle,
> A wretched failure. I, for one, protest
> Against it, and I hurl it back with scorn."

Walt Whitman speaks quite as strongly:

> "If I came but to ashes of dung,
> If maggots and rats ended us, then Alarum! for we are betrayed.
> Then indeed suspicion of death."

Here is a finer way of putting it—from Whitman also—a way more worthy of a poet, it has upon it the poet's glamour:

> "Is it a dream?
> Nay but the lack of it the dream.
> And failing it life's lore and wealth a dream,
> And all the world a dream."

Shall I quote any more from Browning? Yes, one passage in a poem devoted wholly to this question of religion, "La Saisiaz;" where he says that life after death makes this life's troubles sweet. It is the old simple thought that welled up in man's heart ages ago in a new Browning dress. This dress gains for it entrance among the learned. These may have forgotten it, but Browning calls to them, 'Lo! it is here still. I will trick it out afresh, in my learned style, and you will turn to it again.'

"Only grant my soul may carry high thro' death her cup unspilled,
Brimming tho' it be with knowledge, life's loss drop by drop distilled,
I shall boast it mine—the balsam, bless each kindly wrench that wrung
From life's tree its inmost virtue, tapped the root whence pleasure sprung,
Barked the bole, and broke the bough, and bruised the berry, left all grace
Ashes in death's stern alembic, loosed elixir in its place!"

But brimming the soul's cup must be, no drop spilt out of it, everything in it yonder that was in it here. And that this immortality is of the individual soul, and will give us back our lost loved ones, take for proof the last verse of "Prospice," one of Browning's finest short poems. Also one of his best known:

"For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave.
The Black minute's (death's) at end.
And the elements rage, the fiend voices that rave
Shall dwindle, shall blend.
Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain.
Then a light, then thy breast.
O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
And with God be the rest."

VI.

Has Browning put forth his hand and touched any of the great Christian mysteries? He has. In one

of "Ferishtah's Fancies," "The Sun," he has dealt with no less a mystery than the Incarnation, that great historic doctrine which fires the soul. "The Sun" is one of the most difficult of all the "Fancies," and I am not sure that, after repeated readings, I have apprehended it correctly. It is written, so to speak, in shorthand; the amount of thought is out of proportion to the amount of language used to express it. I shall not here follow the thought in all its windings, but shall give its leading points, and the conclusion at which Browning seems to arrive. An ireful, puzzled person had come to the Dervish with a complaint, viz., that a fool had told him,

> "God once assumed on earth a human shape."

He had vented that blasphemy. The Dervish in reply sets himself to show how it might even have been so, a truth and no blasphemy. In doing this he starts from the idea that in his religion, as in all else, man is strictly conditioned by the laws of his nature. God made him a man and a man he must be; not more, not less; not a being with senses superior to a man's, not a being with senses inferior. So far as his man's senses will carry him he must go, further than this he cannot go:

> "Man once, man for ever, man in soul
> As man in body."

One consequence is this, when we think of the Supreme Being we are obliged to think of him as

possessing man-like qualities. If we cannot so think of him we cannot worship him:

> "Man's soul is moved by what if it in turn
> Would move, is kindred soul: receiving good
> —Man's way—must make man's due acknowledgment,
> No other."

What has reason, that sentry which stands guard at the doors of the mind, to say about this? Reason condemns it. But we are to pay no attention. We are to listen to "the dear necessity," and one moment to imagine things which next moment we confess unimaginable. It looks paradoxical. But Browning was something of a philosopher as well as a poet; and philosophy is full of paradoxes, or what to the lay mind appear such. Now the complainer has his innings, and his plan is to ensnare Ferishtah in his own net—"Out of thine own mouth will I judge thee." You say that in all things man must act according to the law of his nature, and cannot if he would act otherwise. Granted. But does the law of his nature compel, or allow him to believe what is contrary to all experience? Does it not compel him to deny this? And it is contrary to all experience that God should assume on earth a human shape. There is no recorded trace of his ever having done so. What say you?"

Ferishtah, *i.e.*, Browning, gives his answer; which from the orthodox point of view is a weak one. It is in effect this: "There may be something in what you say. But!—there are no limits to the possible.

"What if such a tracing were?
If some strange story stood—whate'er its worth,—
That the immensely yearned-for, once befell,
—The sun (God) was flesh once."

"Some one may have convinced himself that He was, that is conceivable. And how are we to treat such an one? Curse, cuff, and kick him as a fool? By no means. Say this, rather:

"I stand appalled before
Conception unattainable by me
Who need it most."

This is the attitude of reverence and toleration: Browning's attitude towards the great historic dogma. We can say no more. "*Omnia non omnibus*."*

Browning, although a scholar and man of "the classes," shows a wonderfully correct idea of the popular mind, and of its needs in the matter of religion. As here:

"If once we choose belief, on all accounts
We can't be too decisive in our faith,
Conclusive and exclusive in its terms,
To suit the world which gives us the good things."

It is true. A religion to suit the world must possess above all things, definiteness. All day and every day the world is immersed in business—toiling and spinning, hurrying, sweating, struggling, fighting and pleasuring, hating and loving, eating and drinking, making money—above all things making money.

* "Parleying with Francis Furini."

It has no time to think of its soul. It hardly knows whether it has got a soul; probably it has never asked the question. It is not unwilling to be religious —after a fashion—but somebody must make a religion for it. It has no time to make one for itself. And the religion made must be of a plain pattern, such as he who runs may read. And fixed, above all things fixed; not a living thing but a piece of mechanism. For living things change, and we too must change to keep abreast of them. Here—in the world's turmoil, in its labours that remorselessly come back every morning, in its necessity for being practical, in its spiritual crassness—in these facts the orthodox churches find their opportunity. Embracing which they do a real service. For the idealist cannot get a hold of the world, but the dull-minded dogmatist can. To the world he stands for the infinite; although it is terribly little of the living infinite that comes from his lips.

But all are not of the world; numbers are of the spirit, men resolved to bear their own burdens and fight their battles for themselves. And to all such what a man like Browning thought about religion must have a real interest, and be of real service. His religion as we have seen, was devoid of system, had

"Centre everywhere
Nor cared to fix itself to form."

And it was permeated with doubt; as all faith must be to deserve the great name, to be faith. We

long for fixity, certitude, some immovable truth we can pillow our heads upon and rest. How we do long for it! But it is denied us, that we may live and not die. For life is incessant movement and change; mostly a going forward, let us hope, but sometimes a going back. Never stagnation, never a sitting still. This truth had possession of Browning even to the marrow, and he voiced it often. Of himself he says:

> "I am in motion, and all things beside
> That circle round my passage thro their midst."

This is the great thing for a human soul, to be in motion. For it non-motion is death. And here comes in the great use of doubt as against certitude, of difficulty as against ease, of trouble as against peace. The idea is profoundly and nobly set forth in "A Death in the Desert,"—the death of St. John; one of the noblest poems Browning ever wrote. It is a great idea. It is that which inspired St. Paul when he exclaimed: "I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those which are before, I press towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." This spirit dwells in all manly breasts; a spirit doomed to participate in the "Great Unrest," the forward and upward movement of the universe. All have something of it probably, but men of genius have it in its fulness. Their delicate organisation puts them in closest sympathy with Nature, and how can they rest

when all Nature is in flux—going forward mostly we must believe? Without such belief how could any man be brave? how could he cut himself from his moorings and make for the great ocean? Such belief will grow weak at times; for it is the essence of faith, as we have seen, to have doubt mixed with it; doubt, which is the reverse side of faith. And doubt will demand to have its innings. But after storm comes calm, and after night comes the morning:

> "For like a child sent with a fluttering light
> To feel his way across a gusty night
> Man walks the world. Again and yet again
> The lamp shall be by fits of passion slain.
> But shall not he who sent him from the door
> Relight the lamp once more, and yet once more?"

VI.

BROWNING AND OPTIMISM.

It is an old saying, that truth is stranger than fiction, which unquestionably some truths are. This one, for instance, that man has been, probably, millions of years upon the earth, and has not yet made up his mind upon its character. Is it a well-ordered sunshiny land, where he can attain to self-development and be happy? or is it a kind of moral wilderness, where he can only prowl as a higher beast of prey or crouch as a slave? Is there a God above it and a God's law in it, helping him to the former lot? or is there only necessity compelling him to the latter? To this question no answer at once final and unanimous has been given. The assertion will, no doubt, seem ridiculous to many; to the man in the street, for instance, whom I can imagine retorting that an answer has been given, and it is, "yes!" An emphatic yes, too. Here's to life, then, with three times three—especially if "there's liquor i' the cannikin."

How enviably happy this man in the street is!

How little trouble he gives himself in the way of raising disagreeable questions—of the speculative sort I mean. For he sometimes does raise questions of another sort—when he is hungry, for instance, and has not the wherewithal to appease his hunger. Then he swears the social machine is out of joint, and though he should tear it to pieces he will set it right. It is not himself that is wrong, it is the machine; which, he perceives on examination, is an engine of injustice devised to crush him. He is a dangerous fellow when he gets this idea, and wise rulers, knowing it, contrive to keep that belly of his full. Given the full belly and he jogs along as careless as happy, asking no questions about either the universe or himself; secure in the comprehensive feeling, vague but strong, that "It's all right."

The man in the street is the natural man, governed more by his stomach than by his brain, by impulse more than by reason, by desire more than by conscience. But there is another kind of man, viz., the non-natural or spiritual: he whom thought has transformed and raised to a higher plane than that on which the stomach moves. He it is who has created the literatures and philosophies of the world; and when dark problems press it is to him we look for assistance. What are we? what is our life? whence came it? whither goes it? has it a meaning? upon the whole is it well, or is it upon the whole ill? is it good to be here, or had we better not have been?—are some of the questions that crowd up within us.

We ask the man of thought to answer them for us. And we ask our own soul for an answer; for the very fact of raising a problem implies an effort on our part to solve it.

What judgment, then, have men of thought passed upon the world? How have they felt about its moral character, the order that prevails in it, to which, as to necessity, we all must bow? Is it a beneficent order or the opposite? Does it care for man? Or is it an iron law, moving forward and crushing lives as callously as the car of Juggernaut?

The uninitiate, they who have never passed beyond the kindly shelter of revealed religion, will wonder that such a question ever should be asked. And they will think there can be only one answer to it. But it is a queer thing thought, an inscrutable thing; a terrible power to let loose among comfortable faiths, traditional ideas. They who wish to retain such had better take care what they are about, and not call up thought within them. Far less let them set it to work. It is like fire, after it gets full way it is beyond our control; no man of us can tell whither his mind may carry him. Once stir some questions, we cannot leave them alone. "We must grapple with them or be lost," says a novelist who is also a thinker[2]; "and when haunted by that cold eye of intense inner-consciousness, the clearest soul becomes a cunning fox if it have not courage to stand and do battle."

Examining the testimony of the great minds we

[2]Geo. Meredith, in 'Richard Feverel.'

find it generally in support of the popular view. This is, that the world is good and it is a good thing to be in it. I do not profess to have studied most, or even much of this testimony at first hand; I know, as many do, something of it at second hand. I know, for instance, what the Hebrew prophets taught; what Socrates and Plato taught; what St. Paul taught; and I know the teaching of the great Christian tradition. I also know the general trend of German philosophy; which is towards a gospel of hope rather than of despair, towards faith rather than denial.

But among the great minds of the world there are some notable exceptions; and none more so, probably, than Buddha. I speak here with hesitation and fear, not knowing into what error I may at any moment and unawares fall. No Western mind knows, clearly and thoroughly, what Buddhism actually is. It appears to be a profounder secret than the secret of Hegel. In its depth, its subtlety, its fine-spun threads of thought, it is beyond the Western mind. The famous "Nirvana," for instance, the goal of true life according to the Buddhist, his heaven, what about it? Ideas are held upon it as opposite to each other as the poles:—that it is the absolute of living peace; that it is absolute death, the exit from being of the soul. What is the inference? It is that, if "Nirvana" be any thing at all, it is something which only a more highly developed consciousness than ours can conceive. We must wait, we must watch, we must work, we must struggle, we must pass through more and yet

more incarnations, and we may conceive "Nirvana" then.

I spoke of the Hebrew prophets as witnessing for God and a moral order, and, by consequence, for good as "the final goal of ill." But others beside the prophets speak in the Bible: the writer of Ecclesiastes, for instance, and upon the question of optimism versus pessimism we cannot ignore him. Ecclesiastes is a small book, but its teaching is decisive, it gives no uncertain sound. And the sound it does give is not cheering—not the trumpet's call, but the pibroch's wail; it comes from a broken heart, and its tendency is to break their hearts who listen to it. Could there be more abysmal blackness than this?—

> "So I returned and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun, and beheld the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter. Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive. Yea, better is he than both they which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun."

As a picture of the dark side of life we cannot get beyond that; it is gloom unrelieved. The wise enjoin us to be diligent and get knowledge; but this is surely knowledge we had better been without. I think no father should tell it to his child, and no husband should tell it to his wife. If they had sympathy and imagination, if they fully realised it, it would lie too

heavily upon their hearts. Why did not the writer keep it to himself, to wring his own soul only? There must have been something special about a man, and something special about his circumstance, when he saw the like of it. Biblical scholars say there was; they say this is one of the latest books of the Bible, and was written in an age of national decadence. Law had broken down, disorder had come, human nature had reverted to its primitive character, and the strong, taking advantage of their strength, oppressed the weak. Amid such a state of things how could a man's heart be light? How could he have hope? How could he believe there was a God in heaven when he saw no trace of a God upon the earth? "The dyer's hand is subdued to what it works in," and in like manner our minds are subdued to the conditions they live amid. No doubt we act upon our surroundings; and sometimes we shape them to our will, so great are our strength and our resolution, so happy our situation. But sometimes also these surroundings are too many for us: we go down before them; and they are not always the common-minded that go down first.

We may account for Buddhism in the same way as we account for Ecclesiastes, viz., by referring it to external circumstances. If I rightly remember, Oldenberg, in his "Life of Buddha," the best work on early Buddhism I understand, does this; he points out the physical character of the country of the Ganges, whence Buddha sprang. There Nature is Titanic,

overpowering; man in comparison is a pigmy, and feels himself such. He has consequently lacked the courage to wrestle against Nature and assert his sovereignty. Instead of doing this he has looked to his gods; and his gods have helped him—in the usual way.

Things being so when Buddha came into the world and opened his eyes upon it, he was unfavourably impressed. He saw the weakness and the misery of man. He saw poverty, he saw disease, he saw suffering—the whole tale of human wretchedness and helplessness; and the sight sickened him. He looked within and questioned his heart, and his heart answered, "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward." So he turned his back upon life. He preached the gospel of renunciation. Do without; crush your desires; learn self-denial; the love of living, put that away. So shall you attain. It is an evil thing to be born, and the way to cease being born is to keep my law. Evade the law, and you will have incarnation upon incarnation, and sorrow upon sorrow.

To come down to a much later period, to our own times, the pessimistic spirit is moving about stealthily in our midst. There is no reasoned system in this country as in Germany, but there is a whisper, a breath, an inarticulate emotion. We have had one pessimistic poet, Thomson; and we have one pessimistic novelist, Thomas Hardy; and there may be others; dumb, silent, secretly devouring their hearts. Carlyle! I had almost forgotten him. But perhaps

he now belongs to the past. Yet he was a contemporary of Browning; and although he did not preach a gospel of despair, he did preach like a man in desperation; as if it were the eleventh hour, and the world was not saved, nor of a mind to be saved. Certainly he did not radiate sunshine, that buoyant feeling which is as much a necessary of life as bread and fuel are if we are to make life a success. Gloom steals away our strength, our hope, our spirit of enterprise, and keeps us down at the animal level. Cheerfulness does the very opposite; plenty of it is better to us than money in our pocket; for having it we can earn money. If it were universal the medical practitioner would have much less to do, and workhouses and hospitals would be less required. "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine." The other day I saw the review of a book that confirms this view—"The Force of Mind, or the Mental Factor in Medicine," by A. T. Schofield, M.D. The reviewer says, "It cannot but prove profitable reading to every one interested in its subject." It appears to give back to mind that high place, that governing power in man's life, of which the materialistic philosophy had deprived it. We are more at the mercy of our minds than we know, it says. Mind, i.e., the patient's mind, especially his unconscious mind, plays a real part in causing and in curing disease. It is because they have seen this and acted upon it that quacks have sometimes succeeded where learned M.D.'s have failed. Dr. Schofield is the author of another book,

"The Unconscious Mind"; which is a title that in itself is suggestive. Until lately who had surmised that unconscious mind exists; much less that it constitutes, as it probably does, the better half of our being—the larger and the nobler half? It is a favourite idea of some modern writers, Maeterlinck, for instance; and it harmonises with what Browning says, not once or twice but several times, of the "Soul," "the unsounded sea." We *are* far more—our life goes down deeper, its margins stretch out wider—than we know.

What now are we to say? We say that he who successfully medicines our minds works us infinite good. His influence passes beyond our mind to our body, and is reflected back from our body, "full circle," to our mind again. The impetus does not quickly exhaust itself; it may mean many days' new life and strength, beautiful new hope, to us. They who have been lifted out of great sorrow, out of black despair to sunlit heights of hope, will understand this. In Tennyson's "Life," by his son, there is a striking story of a Crimean soldier that flashes light upon what I am saying. He had been wounded, and was lying utterly depressed in the hospital at Scutari; the doctors at their wits' end, not knowing what to make of him. Then someone read to him Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade;" in which charge he had been wounded, and the effect was electrical. He came back as if from the dead. His eye kindled, his cheek flushed, he pulled himself

together, he rode, in imagination, that tremendous charge over again; and in a day or two he was well. It was his soul that had been reached; and reviving from its desolate condition, it brought up the sick body along with it.

A buoyant feeling, let me repeat, is one of the first essentials of our life, if it is to be a man's life and not a brute's. And Browning by his optimism, which is always to the front, strong and unhesitating, helps us to this. Optimism is one of his great characteristics as a poet. It is ever meeting us, like an April sunburst, as we turn over his pages. And it is one of the best things we can meet with in all this world; especially when it infects us and makes us as itself is. A light heart! that is beyond price, more precious than rubies, better even than wisdom; for of what worth is wisdom when sadness overweighs us? what can we do with it then? And Browning helps us to the light heart. Hear this! a thing that in its gladness, its resounding hopefuluess, is like a lark in the blue:

> "O world, as God has made it! all is beauty:
> And knowing this is love, and love is duty.
> What further may be sought for or declared?"

And these ringing lines from "Saul," which come upon us almost like dance music:

> "How good is man's life, the mere living! how fit to
> employ
> All the heart, and the soul, and the senses for ever in joy!'

They are part of the song David sang, accompanying with the harp, to rouse Saul out of his soul-sickness. And it did rouse him :

> "One long shudder thrilled
> All the tent till the very air tingled, then sank and was stilled
> At the King's self left standing before me released and aware."

And it is fitted to rouse us, even if we are old and have found life rather a disappointment. For then, if our hearts are right, if we are what is called in modern phrase altruistic, we may be happy by sympathy. Thinking of the young, and of "the wild joys of living" they have, we may rejoice with them. And I suppose this is the purest joy that ever in this world visits man's heart—the nearest to what we dream of as the joy of angels.

Browning puts words into the mouth of Fra Lippo Lippi about the meaning of which there cannot be a doubt. And there is just as little doubt that they express what Browning himself felt. The sentiment is a favourite with him, always bubbling up, and always thrusting itself into his verse when the chance is :

> "This world's no blot for us,
> Nor blank ; it means intensely and means good :
> To find its meaning is my meat and drink."

Armed with such a faith a man may indeed become an inquirer; he will feel assured then that to whatever

depth he may send his thought, or to whatever height, it will never bring him back bad news, it will never report ill of the world. Increase of knowledge will not be to him increase of sorrow. Alas! there are some who are not so armed; and who have ceased asking questions from fear of the answers which may be returned to them, the answers already returned being so sombre. It is a mournful condition to be in. But should not such persons consider whether it is really the world that is "out of joint," or themselves, their minds? It is an old idea that we see only what we bring with us the faculty for seeing; if we bring a diseased faculty the world as it lies before us will appear awry. Contrarily, if we bring a healthy faculty it may be all beautiful, a land of Beulah, a happy land. But this reasoning does not carry us far. It may be replied that we cannot help our mind, more than we can help the colour of our hair, or the fashion of our countenance; his mind being the pre-existent force that forms the man, even to his finger tips. But perhaps after all we can help: and in any case it is good for us to try. It is good when we see the world all dark and tangled, a blackness and horror, to turn from it and look within.

"Sink in thyself: there ask what ails thee, at that shrine."

But this is tending towards the unhealthy; so let us back to Browning, the robust and the sunny-natured, the man who, having explored life, has good news to give us. As here;

"There shall never be one lost good! what was shall live as before:
The evil is null, is naught, is silence implying sound:
What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so much good more:
On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven a perfect round.

X.

"All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist;
Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor good, nor power,
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melodist
When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.
The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard;
Enough that He heard it once; we shall hear it by-and-by."[1]

What a God's voice this is if it be true! Or whether it is true or not, if we can believe it. For faith is faith, and does its great work whether it is founded upon fact or only upon fancy. Either way it is strength within us; as the careful reader of "Bishop Blougram" will know.

But Browning goes further: he appears prepared to be optimistic even against the dictates of reason—as here:

[1] "Abt Vogler."

"Oh, that's absurd! as with some monstrous fact
Which, when ill thoughts beset us, seems to give
Merciful God that made the sun and stars,
The waters and the green delights of earth,
The lie! I apprehend the monstrous fact—
Yet know the Maker of all worlds is good,
And yield my reason up, inadequate
To reconcile what yet I do behold,
Blasting my sense!"

Which is to say, that understanding and the senses give us no trustworthy account of the world; they report only appearances; and if we would get beyond appearances to reality we must become idealists, must cast ourselves upon the intuitions of the soul. These have a very different, and a far nobler story to tell us. In them only is there safety. Upon them only can the higher life be based; without them there can be no higher life; there can only be, for thoughtful minds, at last, denial and pessimism. If St. Paul's saying, "The things that are seen are not made of things which do appear," be a lie, nothing can save our intellectual life from tragedy. For, the more we know of the world of appearance, the phenomenal world, the more terrible it seems—a devil's world and not a God's. Here increase of knowledge *is* increase of sorrow.

I like specially a bit of optimism in "Fifine at the Fair;" in which Browning stretches a hand to the outcast woman, and draws her in, the unhoused soul, to the fold of humanity. She is Fifine the gipsy

dancer, making her living by unconventional exhibitions of her person; yet she is no less a woman. Her also the great God made; and her the great God cares for still; He has a purpose in her:

> "No creature's made so mean,
> But that, someway, it boasts, could we investigate,
> Its supreme worth: fulfils, by ordinance of fate,
> Its momentary task, gets glory all its own,
> Tastes triumph in the world pre-eminent, alone.
> Where is the single grain of sand, 'mid millions heaped
> Confusedly on the beach, but, did we know, has leaped
> Or will leap, could we wait, i' the century, some once,
> To the very throne of things?—earth's brightest for the nonce
> Where sunshine shall impinge on just that grain's facette
> Which fronts him fullest, first, returns his ray with jet
> Of promptest praise, thanks God best in creature's name.
> As firm is my belief, quick sense perceives the same
> Self-vindicating flash illustrate every man
> And woman of our mass, and prove, throughout the plan,
> No detail, but in place allotted it, was prime
> And perfect."

This reminds me of a passage from Louis Stevenson, one of the strongest bits of writing ever done by that pen of his, which had the witchery in it. The thought of the essayist is almost facsimile the thought of the poet, and I shall give it here at some length. It is a passionate plea for "ne'er-do-weels," in whom he finds an element of goodness that no extreme of hardship or wickedness can wholly destroy. There are varieties of these creatures, and Stevenson enumerates a few of them : the rollicking sailor who finds happiness in spending his money on his bottle and his lass ; the lass, the gin-fed prostitute, on whom the money is spent ; the drudging, unillumined mechanic with the drunken wife ; this wife herself ; the Indian mother who, broken-hearted, throws her infant into the Ganges :—these and others, how does he speak of them ? What has the pen of genius to tell about this tragic company ? Read !

"Ah, if I could show you this ! if I could show these men and women all the world over, in every stage of history, under every abuse of error, under every circumstance of failure, without hope, without help, without thanks, still obscurely fighting the lost fight of virtue, still clinging, in the brothel or on the scaffold, to some rag of honour, the poor jewel of their souls ! They may seek to escape, and yet they cannot ; it is not alone their privilege and glory, but their doom ; they are condemned to some nobility : all their lives long the desire of good is at their heels, the implacable hunter."

In his "Wisdom and Destiny" Maeterlinck has a kindred sentiment:

"No man can have fallen so low, but he still has a retreat in his soul, where he ever shall find a few drops of pure water, and be girt up with the strength that he needs to go on with his life." And this:—"When Jesus met an adulterous woman, then did humanity rise to the level of God."

Jesus! the God-man! was it not from Him that these two writers, consciously or unconsciously, learned their lesson? He was the great master of soul-lore; to Him the soul had no secrets; it lay before Him as an open book; what He said about it was never wrong. And He said this—a thing strange beyond words—that publicans and harlots would go into the Kingdom of God before the Scribes and Pharisees; the outcast before the conventionally learned or the conventionally religious; they had more living souls. Is it not strange?

Browning reminded me of Stevenson; now Stevenson and Maeterlinck in turn remind me of Browning, of these lines:

"He is Saul ye remember in glory,—ere error had bent
The broad brow from the daily communion; and still, though much spent,
Be the life and the bearing that front you, the same, God did choose
To receive what a man may waste, desecrate, never quite lose."

It is good to have a faith like this; to feel that while human nature may sink low, and very low, there is a depth beneath which it can never sink. Man once, man for ever! The good in him is not wholly destructible.

So far we have had pleasant converse with Browning; what he has told us is beyond expression cheering, and we could wish there was no other side to the picture. How good if there was no other side! But there is another side, and we must look at it also. But first let us see how Browning came by that optimism of his, which served him so well. Shakespeare has the illuminating thought on most subjects if we know where to find it, and he has the illuminating thought here:

> "I see men's judgments are
> A parcel of their fortunes, and things outward
> Do draw the inward quality after them,
> To suffer all alike."

What kind of fortune had Browning? the "things outward" of his life, what were they? There can be only one answer to this question; and it is that Browning was one of those who, to use a common phrase, are born with a silver spoon in their mouth. And it remained in his mouth all through his life; never through accident or foolishness was it taken away; death found it where birth had placed it. To drop the metaphor, Browning was fortunate in every circumstance of his life, except in the early neglect by the public of his genius, and the works of his genius.

But even from the first he had a few admirers; and these would have encouraged him to go on, scornful of the world, had he not found the needful encouragement in himself. Which he did. But it was a great thing to have had his father, that strong rock, at his back from the outset; and after the strong rock sank, to have had the strong rock's money. It gave a sunny brightness to the world, it prepared a smooth way before him, it kept his cup full; remembering which things we do not wonder at or blame his optimism. No human nature, not even that of a poet born in Camberwell, is superior to circumstances; and this it is that makes circumstances so important. Even of life and death they are sometimes the well-springs. At the time Browning was sunning himself in Italy, singing:

> "God's in His Heaven,
> All's right with the world."—

another English poet was fighting his terrible fight in London. This was Thomson the pessimist, author of "The City of Dreadful Night," the most fearful, lurid poem in the language. I shall risk a quotation, only one:

> "My brother, my poor brothers, it is thus;
> This life itself holds nothing good for us;
> But it ends soon and never more can be;
> And we knew nothing of it ere our birth,
> And shall know nothing when consigned to earth
> I ponder these thoughts and they comfort me."

This is a very different sentiment from Browning's,

> "God's in His Heaven,
> All's right with the world."

And yet the one came out of a human soul as the other came out of a human soul. But the circumstances were different. Browning was a garden rose, set well to the sun, sheltered from every wind, and receiving over and above the attentions of the gardener. Thomson was a rose upon the heath, set in poor soil, battered by the storms, and bruised by the feet of roaming beasts as they passed by. From such opposite conditions there could not be the same results. Of course there was, to begin with, considerable difference in temperament. Thomson was sensitive and irascible, and when the world, instead of fondling him, slapped him in the face, he turned round and cursed the world. Browning not only came to a home filled with sunshine, he came with sunshine in his blood, like his own Luitolfo; he was

> "Fit for the sunshine, so it followed him."

But ought he not to have travelled beyond himself, sent his thoughts abroad and acquainted himself with the various conditions of men? Nature has given the poet a double portion of imagination and sympathy, and she has given him this for a special purpose—that he may be in touch with life at a greater number of points than common men. His mission is to know mankind, and feel with them; to speak to and for them as the common man cannot. Judged by this

canon Browning as a poet is deficient. The great world around him never laid its spell upon him. Detachment from it was necessary to his enjoyment of antique lore and art, and to the writing of his peculiar poetry; so he kept himself detached. He knew it as though he knew it not. Especially he knew not, or did not chose to know, the world's dark side. Doubtless he had heard of a social question; but it does not seem to have troubled him, or to have engaged him, or to have interested him; he never wrestled with it; it did not take away his peace, or his faith either. Shakespeare says:

> "A beggar's book
> Outworths a noble's blood." (King Henry VIII)

Yes! if we could get it, if there was found the beggar clever enough to write such a book. It might tell us things that would force us to revise our philosophies. "I have come from below," cries that dreadful voice from Russia—Maxim Gorky's—"from the nethermost ground of life, where is naught but sludge and murk. . . . . I am the truthful voice of life, the harsh cry of those who still abide down there, and who have let me come up to bear witness to their sufferings."

This is the cry of one who has himself felt the pain; and whom the pain has turned into a rebel, all the humanities dead in him, the passion of hate regnant. Would Browning have listened to such a voice? would he even have heard it, this shriek of wildness and despair? I doubt if he would. His art so absorbed

him that he had no time to look on commonplace life, far less lay its grim facts to heart. Maeterlinck says of the great stoic, Marcus Aurelius:

"He never asked himself what might be happening outside that admirable little circle of light wherein his virtue and consciousness, his divine meekness and piety, had gathered those who were near him, his friends and his servants. Infinite iniquity, he knew full well, stretched around him on every side: but with this he had no concern."

In this respect Marcus Aurelius stood not alone; the attitude is a not uncommon one in the drawing-room portion of mankind towards the gutter portion of mankind; as Ruskin in one of his pithy passages says: The former are quite aware of the latter, but they have the faculty of forgetting. And they feel it their interest to forget, and they do forget. This Browning seems to have made a principle of doing; it enabled him to preserve his artistic calm, and to construct his sunny theory of life. But he has, once or twice, referred to life's inequalities, and the sorrows that thereby hang; as in "Sordello:"

> "There is such niggard stock of happiness
> To share, that, do one's uttermost, dear wretch,
> One labours ineffectually to stretch
> It o'er you, so that mother and children, both
> May equitably flaunt the sumpter cloth!"

It is no doubt stated, but stated coldly: the passion of humanity is not in it. We think of the writer rather as one who has seen than as one who has felt; it is

not the philanthropist's but the artist's hand that shows itself here. This from "Ferishtah" is better:

> "'Tis mine—to boast no joy
> Unsobered by such sorrows of my kind
> As sully with their shade my life that shines."

And in the lyric epilogue to the "Fancies" he says, comprehensively,

> "All of life's a cry just of weariness and woe."

Full well Browning knows that there are victims. But the knowledge of this does not seem to disturb him; he nowhere writes as a man whom the thought of it has stricken to the heart; contriving to forget, he goes upon his way, cheerily singing:—

> "God's in His Heaven,
> All's right with the world."

How can he do it? Is it sheer thoughtlessness, hardness of heart, the egotism of the happy, that loneliness of self in which the untried by trouble often dwell? I think, hardly. Browning is not the vulgar optimist described by Lowell:

> "Sun, sink no deeper down the sky;
> Earth, never change this summer mood:
> Breeze, loiter thus for ever by,
> Stir the dead leaf or let it lie:
> Since I am happy all is good."

Where then did his optimism come from? How did he get it, this precious possession, which is beyond price, purchasable in no market, not even by the millionaire? It came to him in his blood. He was born seeing brightness. And not only that, he was

born with a strange incapacity for seeing blackness, even when it was fronting him, staring him in the face. Rather he did see it, but never as blackness; always as the other side of whiteness, whose necessary complement it was. There is evil in the world, unquestionably, but there are also the uses of evil, which redeem it from being evil absolute. Such is his philosophy—so far as he has one:

> "I can believe this dread machinery
> Of sin and sorrow would confound me else,
> Devised, all pain, at most expenditure
> Of pain by Who devised pain,—to evolve,
> By new machinery in counterpart
> The moral qualities of man—how else?
> To make him love in turn and be beloved,
> Creative and self-sacrificing too,
> And thus eventually Godlike."

Similarly, in "Fifine":

> "We must endure the false, no particle of which
> Do we acquaint us with, but up we mount a pitch
> Above it, find our heads reach truth, while hands explore
> The false below."

And "Bishop Blougram," into whose cynical worldliness Browning has condensed a great deal of wisdom, says:

> "Some think, Creation's meant to show him forth:
> I say, it's meant to hide him all it can,
> And that's what all the blessed evil's for."

The thought animates several of "Ferishtah's

Fancies;" and it is beautifully hinted at, so as not to offend, in "A Death in the Desert:"

> "So duly, daily needs provision be
> For keeping the soul's prowess possible,
> Building new barriers as the old decay,
> Saving us from evasion of life's proof,
> Putting the question ever, Does God love,
> And will ye hold that truth against the world?"

Yes! "Does God love?" That is the question. Gazing into this wilderness of a world, with its struggles, its sufferings, its degradations, can we find in it love, a Fatherly power at work, an order generously conceived—some signs that "good will be the final goal of ill?" Can we find trace of these things? Browning would answer, yes. But on one condition, viz., that we regard evil as having moral uses in the world-plan, as being necessary to the evolution of good. This is no new idea, but it is a profound and ever interesting one. It is as old as the Stoic philosophy, and for any thing I know it may be centuries older. It is the only reasonable solution of that ancient and grim problem, "The Origin of Evil;" the only solution that satisfies our moral sense, that gives us peace at the centre. When we feel that evil in its ultimate significance means good we are wonderfully relieved: our chains slip off, our hearts soften, life returns to them, we breathe again, we leap and walk—like him whom Peter cured—and there come back a dewy freshness, and verdure and flowers, upon our Sahara of a world. This idea is unfolded

at length in the "Parleying" with Bernard de Mandeville.

The man who helps us to think in this way about evil works for us a great deliverance. That Browning does to some extent so help us is certain. But it is also certain that he would have helped us more, and far more, had he preached his optimism from the wilderness; not from that Eden, that sunlit languorous Italy with the glamour upon it, in which his life was passed. Sometimes when we recollect that it is in this Eden the preacher is, protected against things hideous, not even seeing them, we lose patience and blaspheme. We incline to bid him, 'Shut up,' to remember Shakespeare:

> 'I see men's judgment are
> A parcel of their fortunes, and things outward
> Do draw the inward quality after them,
> To suffer all alike.'

But even so. Good, i.e., favourable judgments imply good fortunes; and in a world absolutely bad, warranting pessimism, good fortunes cannot be. A life like Browning's—its happy circumstances, its fair weather from beginning to end, its repose and sunshine, the length of it and the beauty of it, is part of the sum total of human life, that total the pessimist would condemn. And such being the case pessimism—absolute, uncompromising pessimism—stands refuted.

But we must not push this view too far. It is like all other truths, if we exalt it above measure, to the neglect of its opposite, it becomes an untruth. The world is not so bad but there is a place in it for the optimist, with that cheery gospel of his, which is marrow to the soul. I wish I could say there is no place in it for the pessimist, with his croaking and despair; but I cannot, there is a place for him too. He also is a servant of the Higher Powers, and they are not vain words, blown as by a chance wind, that he utters. As long as there is suffering humanity there must also be the Cassandra voice, there must be the black-mantled prophet, with his scroll in his hand, full of 'lamentations and mourning and woe.' For instance, that fearfully pessimistic poem I quoted from, Thomson's "City of Dreadful Night," ought to have been written. I solemnly believe it. I would not unwrite it if I could. It was on God's programme and had to be done, could not help itself, must perforce come into being; for the world needed such a poem. Its absolute sincerity would alone justify it. For every word that comes from man's depths, genuine and alive, warm, palpitating, is a word added to the Bible of Humanity; in which we see ourselves reflected as in a glass; and from which we learn.

If the sincere pessimist ought to write, to express himself, the words that he writes ought to be read. But not by everyone; certainly not by them whose faith in a moral order is founded on tradition. For

them the speaker of smooth things is best. An unreserved exhibition of life's blackness might throw them into such mental confusion as would be their ruin. So let them keep their illusions that comfort. But there are the strong as well as the weak among men; and the strong ought to hear themselves as strong, like the Greek Sophocles,

> "Who saw life steadily, and saw it whole."

There is our duty! to see life whole; not the sunny side to the exclusion of the shady side, nor the shady side to the exclusion of the sunny. We must look in all directions, and take note of all within our eyes' range; shirking no ugly fact, evading no harrowing spectacle, stopping our ears to no cry of pain—nor to the shouts of them at life's banqueting-table either—striving to see life whole. So shall we find it not wholly good and not wholly bad, but mixed; as Browning in "A Bean Stripe" teaches.

There is a great compensating truth, which, if we can receive it, tends to quiet our minds: the distribution of fortune, of life's good things, is no correct index to the distribution of happiness. The rich man is not so blessed as he looks, and the beggar at his gate is not so wretched as he looks. The rich man is often cursed by ennui, and by the clamour of appetites he has over-fed. The beggar on the other hand has been mercifully unable to develop his humanity; he has not reached that degree of sensitiveness which is not only a new capacity for enjoyment, but a new

and perilous capacity for feeling pain. In our hot-house civilization there are neurotic creatures who feel a pin-prick as their old rough ancestors felt a brave sword-thrust. There is never profit by itself, there is always profit *and* loss. When Darwin saw the natives of Tierra-Del-Fuego he pitied them for their abject condition, and made overtures to help them. But they indicated that they were well as they were; they did not wish his civilized comforts to corrupt them. In regard to character as to circumstances the seed Desire had not germinated within them.

I think absolute optimism like Browning's is bad, as inducing us to accept life as it is, to abate our efforts at amelioration. Absolute pessimism is bad, as inducing despair; in this way hindering effort also. Let not them who have a place at life's banquet forget the others, those who have no place, who are outside in the darkness and cold. It is ruinous to the individual to forget, and it is dangerous to society. For "if one member suffer, all the members suffer with it."

Take to close with some lines from a great American poet and a great man, Walt Whitman. He saw all the suffering, but he did not lose heart. He was solemnised by what he saw, but his faith was not put to rout. His words are so true and great that they could not be improved upon. They impress us like the tolling of a minster bell. They bury themselves in our heart, and are unforgettable—

"I sit and look out upon all the sorrows of the world and upon all oppression and shame,
I hear secret convulsive sobs from young men at anguish with themselves, remorseful after deeds done,
I see in low life the mother misused by her children, dying neglected, gaunt desperate,
I see the wife misused by her husband, I see the treacherous seducer of young women,
I mark the ranklings of jealousy and unrequitted love attempted to be hid, I see these sights on the earth,
I see the workings of battle, tyranny, I see martyrs and prisoners,
I observe a famine at sea, I observe the sailors casting lots who shall be killed to preserve the lives of the rest,
I observe the slights and degradations cast by arrogant persons upon labourers, the poor, and upon negroes and the like:
All these—all the meanness and agony without end I, sitting, look out upon,
See, hear, and am silent."

VII.

BROWNING'S "PSALM OF LIFE."

(RABBI BEN EZRA.)

THE most widely known of all Browning's poems is probably, "The Pied Piper of Hamelin;" which was written for a child, a son of the actor Macready; but all can enjoy it who have not lost the child-heart. Among the next most widely known is "Rabbi Ben Ezra;" which a miscellaneous mass of people read, and therewith end their Browning studies. They feel that they have got the poet here, and that the labour of wading through, say, "Sordello," or "Fifine at the Fair," is a thing unnecessary. In a sense they are right. We have got Browning here more than in any other piece of equal length that he has written; it is specially representative of its author, a wonderfully correct index to his mind, an abridged edition of his philosophy that will go into the pocket. Suited therefore to all readers who are in a hurry, which the majority of readers now are.

I have ventured to call it Browning's "Psalm of Life," as being the utterance in verse of what, after

half a century's experience, he had found life to be. Half a century is a reasonable allowance of time for a man to make up his mind about the world: and there are clever persons who do this in the half of half a century. They are as gods these in getting knowledge; "Hey Presto!" and they are wise.

Ruskin was past fifty when he ventured to say that he would not likely change his opinions about anything:—he said it in the preface to an edition of his works that was issued thirty years ago. But why stop at fifty? why cease changing and expanding, deepening and lengthening-out, even then? Yet at fifty a man certainly ought to have opinions, something of a philosophy; and if he has been an observant, meditative man, a philosophy worth studying. To persons curious about this mystery of existence, no bit of real experience, nothing that has been actually seen or felt can come amiss. "In the multitude of counsellors there is safety." Let us hear, then, the Rabbi.

But, first, I ought to say that Rabbi Ben Ezra is an historical personage: he belonged to the race of wandering scholars, of whom there were great numbers in the Europe of the Middle Ages, before the era of printing, and even after that. They are an interesting class to read about. They were victims of the passion for knowledge; which, when in its strength, will enslave a man as much as any passion that can possess him. It never leaves him alone; it drives him on; and it dies not till he dies. Often

those scholars must have known the weary foot; and often sat down to the poor dish; and felt the hard bed too. But they kept upon their way, the inward thirst sustaining them; so unlike the outward thirst, which destroys. There would be something, too, doubtless, in the fascination of vagrancy; which, being an inheritance from our far-off nomadic ancestors, appeals to us all.

Rabbi Ben Ezra was born in Toledo about 1090, it is said, and died in 1168: but I have not discovered where. He visited Rome, Mantua, and other famous cities, and even came to England. Like another of Browning's heroes, Paracelsus, he was unfortunate in his life: but there is no hint of any tragic circumstance darkening down upon its close. He knew that he was unfortunate. "I strive to grow rich," he exclaims, "but the stars are against me. If I sold shrouds none would die. If candles were my wares the sun would not set till the day of my death." One of the children of light, he had the children of lights' luck. But he was great in scholarship and philosophy, which more than made up to him, let us hope, for his failure in things temporal. They of his own ~~race~~ Religion, the Jewish, have had endless admiration for him. Great as a grammarian, he appears to have been greater still as a man, a human spirit threading its lone way through the labyrinths of life; learning from everything it meets with; but learning most from the crosses it has to bear.

Browning scholars say it is his philosophy that is

set forth in the poem; and, judging from passages they quote from his works, they are right. It does appear to be a wide wandering, much-learned Rabbi of the 12th century whom we have here; and not only in his spirit but in his ideas. But it is the English Robert Browning also, clothing himself for the nonce in the Rabbi's garb. In his voluminous out-of-the-way reading he had come upon the track of this man, as he came upon the track of Sordello; and finding him to be a kindred spirit, possessing kindred views, he laid hold of him and used him as a mouthpiece. Such, apparently, is the explanation. Every reader of Browning knows that there is not an idea here but could be matched again and again from other poems he has written; that one of brave endeavour, not actual achievement, being the true test of worth could be matched many times over.

The poem is a good example of that vague, short-hand style of expression which is Browning's great sin; and for which the public have punished him by not reading his works. The comprehension of it is not such plain sailing as to a novice might appear; there is abundant room for even a careful reader to miss the mark, and this too while fully convinced he has found it. The exact meaning of one or two lines, I think, must remain uncertain: if they have got an exact meaning, if Browning had an exact thought in his mind when he penned them, which is more than doubtful. Although it must be allowed that we do not look for, and just as little do we expect, absolute

exactness in a poet. When he gives us this he ceases to be a poet. His strength lies in suggestiveness, in choosing words that in themselves, or in their associations appeal to the imagination; and that waken the imagination into activity ; which of all forms of mental exercise is the most agreeable. Newman says, justly, that while to fail in clearness is the greatest fault in an orator, it is the least fault in a poet.

I have said that Browning was over fifty when he wrote this poem ; and when a man has got that length upon the road of life he feels old age to be a reality. It is no longer a hearsay, it has become a stern fact. A few years more and it will be even upon him. And what will it be like when it does come? What will it bring with it? How will he bear himself then? Will there be joy in living as in the days that are gone? To this last question Browning's answer is an emphatic, yes. He strikes out cheerily, in lightheartedness and strength, more like a young man than a middle-aged or old one:

> "Grow old along with me!
> The best is yet to be.
> The last of life, for which the first was made:
> Our times are in His hand
> Who saith "A whole I planned,
> Youth shows but half; trust God: see
> all nor be afraid!"

It is bravely and beautifully spoken, with the courage of a man and the faith of a Christian ; and we ought to thank Browning for it. But we should remember

at the same time that there is another side, that it is only an *ex parte* statement which is given here. What a pity, for instance, that this plan of God should have so often broken down, and should be breaking down every day! In human life there are far more halves and quarters than wholes; fragments, unfinished growths, souls upon whom Fate lays an untimely harsh hand. More than half of mankind possess no practical interest in old age, for the sufficient reason that they are not spared to see it. They die in their strength, or before their strength comes. Accidents, disease, unhealthy dwellings, unhealthy occupations, poverty, vice, sorrow, the sickness of hope deferred—cut off millions every year in their bloom. They are only a few, a straggling small remnant, that escape, and that go on to the natural ending of their days. It is sad. But let not its sadness feed our pessimism overmuch. There may, there must, and there will come change and amelioration. For although individuals grow old, human nature is ever young, heights and depths in it unrevealed as yet. With the advance of science and sanitation, with better social arrangements, with new developments of sympathy, with the general heart grown larger, and more of human feeling flowing from man to man, the few that escape will be turned into the many.

It is also salutary to remember, in face of the optimism displayed here, that old age is not dependent for its happiness upon the mind only. It is largely dependent upon external circumstances—the econo-

mic condition of society, for instance—over which the mind has no control. There have been states of society, rather anti-social states, in which old age simply meant death. There was no old age, it was not allowed to be, the savage horde could not afford such a luxury. "There is abundant evidence," says Maine, "that tribes pressed by enemies and want for long put their aged members to death. The place from which a wild Sclavonic tribe compelled their old men to leap into the sea is still shown."* The present day Tchuktchis, or Alaskans, take a different method, they strangle their old men, having previously had the forethought to drug them with whisky. And the old men themselves exhibit the calm of philosophy, giving a hand at preparing for the ceremony—"Kamitok"—that is to send them onward. De Windt, who tells this, was himself the witness of a strangling. On that occasion the victim was anything but downhearted; he said to De Windt, "Me die Monday;" and he helped to get ready the whisky barrels for the jollification, and the walrus thongs for his execution. It is good to be the chief actor in one scene of your life, even although the last.

Was it some lingering memory of such things that gave the Greeks of the heroic age, and of a far later one, their horror of growing old? There are lines in a fragment of Mimnermus (7th century B.C.) that say:

"When old age with its pains comes upon us,

* "Early Law and Custom."

which mars alike even the fair, ever do wretched cares besiege his mind, nor does he delight in beholding the rays of the sun, but is hateful to boys, and despised among women, so sore a burden has God made old age."

Again:

"When youth has fled, short-lived as a dream, forthwith this burdensome and hideous old age looms over us, hateful and dishonoured, which changes the countenance, marring his sight, and his mind with mists."

So they felt of old. So many feel yet. Has not the modern Tom Moore sung?

> "Give me back, give me back the wild freshness
> of morning,
> Her clouds and her tears are worth evening's best
> light."

And if the question as between youth and age were put to the public vote Moore would carry it by an overwhelming majority; Browning would be nowhere.

The Roman Cicero felt differently, or says he felt differently, from the Greek Mimnermus. He has written a treatise in praise of "Old Age," setting forth the honours of it, and the charming occupations, as agriculture, that may fill up its hours. It is a remarkable performance considering Cicero's time, and the

*Mahaffy's "Social Life in Greece."

physical-force people he lived among. But he was past sixty, not young for a Roman, when he wrote it; and it is just possible that he was whistling to keep up his courage; to do which he was perfectly entitled. But almost any old age may be peaceful if it has got its share of health, and of the ordinary creature comforts; and if over and above these it has the gathered wisdom of years it may be beautiful and sweet,

> "Sweet and bright,
> And lovely as a Lapland night,"

to quote Wordsworth's lines. Such magic is wrought by wisdom. And the fool in "King Lear" is right when he says, "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise."

Having hardened our hearts and looked at the dark side we may now without harm to ourselves, with much good, go over Browning's optimistic poem. It shows the bright side. Rabbi Ben Ezra, *i.e.*, Browning at fifty, certain that "the best is yet to be," invites us to grow old along with him. But before stepping forward into the future he takes a glance back at the past, at youth and its characteristics. And it is a faithful picture of youth that he gives. He sees young people as they always have been, and are, and will continue to be, I suppose—filled with the sense of life's vast resources, bursting with clamorous desires; uncertain, unrestful, impassioned, ambitious, pooh-poohing ordinary good, picking and choosing, not knowing what to make of themselves, but feeling that

they cannot be wrong in grasping at the stars. Which rose will they pluck? which lily leave upon its stem? are the questions they put to themselves before life has tamed them.

Does the poet blame them for this? By no means. He knows better; his heart has taught him a higher wisdom. To condemn them would be "folly wide the mark," he says, (verse iii.) Let youth have its heyday if it can, its bright innocent follies, its great expectations, its errors, its extravagant dreams, that exuberance of both being and doing which is so natural when the blood is young. It is the same gospel as Stevenson preaches in his essay, "Crabbed Age and Youth," where all is brightness, playfulness, sarcasm, and intertwined with these a fine strain of wisdom. This is one of the occasions on which Browning makes us love him, not merely admire. And love him as boys love, not as men do, whom the world has made cold and cautious. It is the ingenuousness, the humanity, the tolerance, the catholicity of the sentiment that affect us. "Have your fling my merry men!" he seems to say; "don't hold in. Life *is* great, is good, has much to give, expect much from it. And ask much from it. Don't accept what offers first. Take time, look high, choose the best. And don't conclude that the time spent in this process of choosing is necessarily misspent; or that the bits of folly done are seriously wrong, a sign and the outcome of weakness. They may be a sign of the opposite."

"The light that led astray
Was light from heaven."

The common-place man, having no troublesome predilections, falls into the first groove that offers, and goes straight ever after, as the trained beast drags the plough. But the man of parts, of genius is different. You cannot get him into harness, often he cannot get himself into harness, without a preliminary "splore." Carlyle was a case in point. It is the superfluity of soul, of brain power, of emotional force, boiling lava-like within, that does it. Such men come in the end to be the salt of the earth; but there is a time when they don't know what to make of themselves, and when the salt is like to lose its savour. Accordingly Browning says:—

Rather I prize the doubt
(*i.e.*, the difficulty, the moral and intellectual upheavings.)
Low kinds exist without,
Finished and finite clods untroubled by a spark."

The spark! It is the spark that does the mischief; but at the same time achieves the glory. It takes away the peace, the animal torpor, of the natural man, while it brings the infinite unrest of man transformed and made spiritual. In this transformed condition we enter upon "The Life"—that life Christ was thinking of when he made His great utterance:—

> "Ye know that the princes of the gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you let him be your minister: and whosoever will be chief among you let him be your servant: even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Again:

> "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

So man finds it to be, as soon as he truly comes to himself and acts out his deepest nature. He is born to be unselfish, to be self-sacrificing, like God himself, from whose being he holds.

> "Rejoice we are allied
> To that which *doth provide*
> And *not partake*, effect and *not receive!*
> A spark disturbs our clod;
> Nearer we hold of God
> Who *gives* than of his tribes who *take* I must believe."

How is a being of this kind to be developed? What is the best education for him, and the only education suitable, the education that will bring to flower and fruit the germs of real life in him? Ah! it is a strange education, the education of failure—rebuff here, disappointment there, pain and perplexity another place, doubt, fear, remorse—the holy but dreadful and

mysterious education of suffering. Therefore the poet goes on :

"Then welcome each rebuff
That turns earth's smoothness rough,
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go !
Be our joys three parts pain !
Strive and hold cheap the strain ;
Learn nor account the pang ; dare, never grudge the
throe."

But for which "stings" certain it is that we would "sit ;"[1] or do that which is worse. One of two things would happen : the world would go to sleep and dry rot be over all, or the animal in us would have everything its own way, with sensualisms outbruting the brute, and inevitable chaos for final consummation.

Along with verse vii, we shall take verses xxiii, xxiv, and xxv, as touching upon the same subject. That subject, as I have indicated, is failure. Browning will not allow that any man who has it in him to form high aims and pursue them ever does or can fail. The aims themselves and his endeavour after them are his success ; which no man, and no circumstance however hard can withhold from him. But many a time, both to himself and others, he appears to fail. And he gets that dreadful thing, the sense of failure ; which sometimes so overwhelms him that he lies prone under it—brow-beat, paralysed, as one dead. Moreover he gets it not as the accident

[1] Max Müller tells of a savage who on being asked what was the height of enjoyment, replied, "To sit still, and do nothing."

of some particular quality he has, but necessarily, as involved in his constitution as a man. He cannot escape it; it is latent in him at his birth; and in due time, as he grows and develops, it pushes forward and asserts itself. But if he does not grow and develop, become more of the man and less of the animal, he will be spared this sorrow. For:—

> "In man there's failure only since he left
> The lower and inconscious forms of life."[1]

And in another of his poems Browning asks "Why should we claim exemption from man's appointed lot, which is to be beaten and baffled?" This implies a rather grim conception of the human lot, yet upon the whole a true one. It is not original in Browning. It is a common-place among poets and philosophers, and among all who have become infected with that incurable malady, the malady of thought. No one has expressed it better, *i.e.*, more concisely, than Fichte. "It is a part of the idea of man," he says, "that his ultimate end must be unattainable:—the way to it endless." Hence, "It is not the vocation of man to attain this end."[2] Also this: "There is no object under the sun or the moon that will satisfy them (human beings, awakened souls). Would we that any such object should satisfy them? By no means: —that nothing finite and perishable can satisfy them —this it is precisely which is the only tie that still connects them with the Eternal and preserves them

[1] "Cleon."
[2] "The Vocation of the Scholar."

in existence:—did they find any one earthly object that should fill them with perfect satisfaction, then were they irretrievably thrust forth from the Godhead, and cast out into the eternal death of Nothingness."[1]

Plenty more of the same sort from other writers might be quoted, but I refrain. I shall give only a few lines from that bright particular spirit, loved by all Scots folk, Robert Louis Stevenson; who, like most true geniuses, knew more than he was aware of. He says: "We look for some reward of our endeavours and are disappointed; not success, not happiness, not even peace of conscience crowns our ineffectual efforts to do well. Our frailties are invincible, our virtues barren; the battle goes sore against us to the going down of the sun."

And again—this time from "A Xmas Sermon," where surely it is out of place: "There is indeed one element in human destiny that not blindness itself can controvert: whatever else we are intended to do we are not intended to succeed. Failure is the fate allotted. It is so in every art and study: it is so above all in the continent art of living well."

But why should it be so? Browning, in the two lines just quoted, has suggested the explanation:

"In man there's failure only since he left
The lower and inconscious forms of life."

As man becomes alive to the Infinite, a great new sense, the sense of his own insignificance, and of the

[1] "The Way towards the Blessed Life.

insignificance of his works, wakens in him; he begins to understand the Psalmist—that old cry, "What is man that thou art mindful of him, or the son of man than thou visitest him?" He feels the Infinite sometimes even to the point of being oppressed by it; and he longs to sink back into the animal, and into animal acquiescence and peace—escape from soul's storm and stress. This persecution of man by the Infinite has been set forth pictorially, with lofty and unrestrained eloquence, by De Quincey: the passage is a well-known one:

"Angel, I will go no further. For the spirit of man aches under this infinity. Insupportable is the glory of God's house. Let me lie down in the grave that I may find rest from the persecutions of the infinite; for end, I see, there is none. And from all the listening stars that shone around there issued one choral chant.—Even so it is: angel, thou knowest that it is: end there is none that ever yet we heard of. End is there none? the angel solemnly demanded: is this the sorrow that kills you? But no voice answered, that he might answer himself. Then the angel threw up his glorious hands to the heaven of heavens, saying, End is there none to the Universe of God? Lo also, there is no beginning."

This conviction of Browning, that failure is man's allotted destiny, kept him calm under the neglect which as a poet he long suffered. Man must fail, he felt, if he aims high; and to aim less than high, at vulgar prizes, is not worth a true man's while.

"Better have failed in the high aim, as I,
Than vulgarly in the low aim succeed,
As, God be thanked, I do not."

A sentiment, this, that turns up in Browning's pages often, and that seems to have formed a rallying point to his mind; to which it ever returned for new strength and courage. The sentiment was due to his personal experiences as a poet, which, we have seen, were hard. So he evolved his doctrine of failure—rather of non-failure—to meet his soul's need; a doctrine that in this view of it takes rank among the great things that necessity has been the mother of. We all require, if not overt success, the consciousness of success invisible, to lead us on; which some of us have to harden our hearts and do without, however. But with no good effect upon our character: excess of gloom, bleakness, has destroyed more souls in this warfare of life than an excess of sunshine ever did. Sir Walter Besant, in his "Eulogy of Richard Jefferies," notes how much better Jefferies wrote after his books began to sell, after he felt he had a public. It was the same with the weird Hawthorne, who said: "As long as people will buy I shall keep at work, and I find that my faculty for labour increases with the demand." Emerson had made a similar discovery: "No genius can long or often utter anything which is not invited by men around him." An indisputable truth. To get the best out of himself—the finest thought, the happiest setting of this thought—a man must always be of good heart. And of equally good

heart must he be to fail, yet not go to pieces in his failure, hold himself together like a man. This did Browning, for many years at least; and there are numerous passages in his poems that show how in those years he felt:

> "Many the loaded ship self-sunk through-treasure
> freight,
> Many the pregnant brain brought never child to
> birth,
> Many the great heart broke beneath its girdle girth."

"Whose turn may it be to-morrow?" asks another writer. . . "Cover the good man who has been vanquished—cover his face and pass on."

Yet Browning kept writing, turning off his lines, as assiduously as if he was getting gold into his hand for them every day. Do you say, it was the egotism of genius? Why should it not? The egotism of genius—a consciousness of its powers and firm belief in these powers, is the necessary complement of genius; without which it would frequently be barren. It is the crowning gift of nature to original minded men, which enables them in the face of opposition to go on with their work, and to walk erect through life. They feel with Pompey:

> "Well, I know not
> What counts harsh fortune casts upon my face:
> But in my bosom shall she never come;
> To make my heart her vassal."
> ("Antony and Cleopatra.")

Browning touches upon another interesting subject

here, his views on which are interesting, and not yet common: the relation between the body and the soul. The traditional idea is that these two are diametrically opposed, their natures being different, and their interests different. True care for the body involves neglect of the soul; and vice-versa, if you would nourish the soul you must not be over-generous to the body, which is the seat of appetites that degrade. This view is not so strongly held now as formerly, when it drove the monks into the desert, to ill-use themselves, until in their filth and emaciation they were abominable. It is a native of the East, where it possesses power still, inspiring the Fakir to those deeds of self torture we read about with horror. But it is dying out in the West, where the Greek feeling about the body is coming into favour: perhaps a more profound, more comprehensive feeling than the Greek, viz., that body and soul are in a manner one; so inextricably joined that injury to the one means injury to the other. One of the most modern of the moderns, for instance, the American Whitman, announces himself the poet of the body as of the soul; and he seems not quite sure how far they are distinguishable. Not absolutely distinguishable at all, probably. "I received identity by my body," he says:

> "What I was I knew was of my body, and what I
> should be I knew I should be of my body."

Again:

"Was somebody asking to see the soul?
See your own shape and countenance. . .

. . . .

Behold the body includes and is the meaning,
the main concern, and includes, and is the soul;
Whoever you are, how superb and how divine is
Your body, or any part of it!"

Thoughts that are as great in their sanity as they are profound in their philosophy. And they are substantially the same as we find here in Browning; only with the greater emphasis upon them that belongs to plainness of speech. Browning says:

"Let us not always say,
Spite of this flesh to-day
I strove, made head, gained ground
upon the whole!
As the bird wings and sings,
Let us cry, all good things
Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now,
Than flesh helps soul."

The old idea was that flesh only hindered soul, and that the treatment proper to it was to keep it down as an enemy. Here that idea is discarded, and its opposite set forth and commended. Flesh was not meant to be, and is not in fact, an enemy of soul, but its friend and coadjutor. And it helps soul in this way, by keeping itself clean and vigorous. To which ends proper food and not too much of it, warmth and shelter, pure air, water, exercise, and the due regulation of its passions are necessary. These things go

deeper than the skin, go to the inner man; and they mean ultimately knowledge, wisdom, faith, joy, a moral equilibrium equal to all life's hazards.

> "All comes of the body, only health puts you
> rapport with the universe."

And soul in its turn helps flesh. How? By being a noble soul; by the integrity and purity, the elevated thoughts, the contentment, the faith, hope, and love that are in it. These qualities act upon the nervous system, and through the nervous system they act upon the other parts of the body—even the hands and feet. It is thus we can believe that in "Faith Healing" there may be a core of truth; which, once disencumbered of fanaticism, may turn out a great truth—nothing less than a new revelation of mind's power over matter. It is thus also that Browning honoured the body: perceiving that when at its best its function is nothing less than to "project thy soul on its lone way." The idea returns upon him again and again, and he has expressed it variously, now in one poem, now in another. As here, for instance:

> "The soul empowers
> The body to reveal its every mood
> Of love and hate, from forth its plenitude
> Of passions."
>
> ("Parleying With F. Furini.")

And here:

> "Body and soul are one thing, with two names
> For more or less elaborated stuff."
>
> ("Red Cotton Night-Cap Country.")

Also here:

> "The dear
> Fleshy perfection of the human shape,—
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "God's best of beauteous and magnificent
> Revealed to earth, the naked female form"
>
> ("F. Furini.")

They say that Browning was a Christian, and I suppose he was; but it is not the Christian, at least not the orthodox Christian sentiment that is revealed here. To get that in its näiveté we must go to another quarter, say to a Boer farm-wife. During the late war a Highland officer went to buy food—ducks and whatever else he could lay hands upon—at her farm. "He soon found himself," says the newspaper correspondent, "sitting on a skin-covered bench in the Voor-Kamer, making his wants known to a Boer girl of 17 or 18, who answered him in English, having been to school in Bloemfontein . . . Suddenly the door leading from the kitchen opened, and the mistress of the farm, a tall, scraggy woman, with a black dress and "cappie" entered the room. She gave one look at the captain, and then retired by the way she came. A minute later she returned with a striped Kaffir blanket held at arms-length in front of her, and advancing slowly to the bench spread it over the bare knees of the Highlander, "Dat is now better," she remarked, as if to herself, and stalked majestically out of the room."

The incident was representative of the natural

woman, of the woman who has "fallen," and knows that she is naked; not the woman who has risen again, become spiritual, and knows that to be naked is no shame.

The Rabbi has something more to say about youth: it is—it was to him at least—not wholly a time of passion and desire, of squandering of life, of vast chaotic ambitions that dissolved in smoke; it was a time of real, though it may be awkward, search after truth. He would have none of the current opinions, the traditions. Had not God made him a man, with a man's brain and heart in him? and it was his duty to act like a man, to prove things for himself. He must open his eyes and look around; he must search into, examine, experiment, weigh and consider, be brave, and wrestle knight-errant like—for what? Ah, for something that if he found it would be a pearl of great price indeed, a vital rule of life, possessing him rather than he possessing it; which no man, or no set of circumstances, or good fortune, or evil, could ever take from him—the truth. This struggle also formed part of his youth—this as well as that boyish egotism, wastefully picking and choosing, referred to already. Pausing in the middle of his days he looks back upon this struggle and approves it. Had it not been he would have missed much. With all its mistakes and uncouthness it helped him to become a man.

> "It was better youth
> Should strive through acts uncouth
> Toward making than repose on aught found made."

And again:

> "This rage (of youth for knowledge) was right i' the main,
> That acquiescence (in tradition) vain:
> The Future I may face now I have proved the Past."

The "rage," the "storm and stress," gained much for him; a rule of life, I have said, a golden rule, knowledge he could lean upon as truth for him. It dispelled doubts and made him

> "Fearless and unperplexed,
> When I wage battle next,
> What weapons to select, what armour to indue."

But really he would have no more battles to wage, unless he was baulked in carrying out his life as he had planned it For, in front of him now there is only old age, which is not a period of life to wage battles in. Youth is such a period; age is for something different—for resting upon, pondering, assimilating, enjoying those truths that youth in its fiery energy had gathered. As the retired business man enjoys his money.

> "Better age, exempt
> From strife, should *know* than tempt
> Further. Thou waitedst age; wait death nor be afraid!

Enough now, if the Right
And Good and Infinite
Be *named* here, *as thou callest thy hand thine own.*

With knowledge *absolute,*
Subject to no dispute
From fools that crowded youth, nor let thee feel alone."

I have italicised the words that seem to me important, as conveying deeper meaning than a superficial reading might disclose. Broadly put, the idea in these verses is, that doubt and inquiry are not for age, more than roystering and going after the girls are. There comes a time when doubt must yield to the conviction that now at last we know, have gained the necessary knowledge, and are released. It is for our juniors to go on with the strife of thought, thank God we are out of it.

Verse xx throws a ray of light upon what Browning here means by knowledge. At least I think so. But I feel at the same time that no one can be certain, so vaguely, so scantily does he express himself, as if it was a sin to be definite. ''Tis his depth,' his idolaters would no doubt say, as they say so often. And perhaps it is. But being only an outsider, and a little irreverent, I would explain it in another way; I would apply to it a well-known Scottish proverb, "No sae deep as drummlie." He speaks of "knowledge absolute," but I am convinced that it is not

absolute knowledge in the philosophical sense that he intends. It is rather the opposite, relative knowledge, as may be proved from numerous passages in his other poems; such as:

> "Forget
> Vain ordinances, I have one appeal—
> I feel, am what I feel, know what I feel;
> So much is truth to me."
>
> ("Sordello.")

Also:

> "Knowledge stands on my experience: all outside its narrow hem,
> Free surmise may sport and welcome!"
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "As knowledge, this comes only—things may be as I behold,
> Or may not be, but, without me and above me things there are."
>
> ("La Saisiaz")

And again:

> "Ask thy lone soul what laws are plain to thee,—
> Thee and no other,—stand or fall by them!
> That is the part for thee."
>
> ("Ferishtah's Fancies.")

Let us now take these passages—and we could find others similar—to aid us in our interpretation of this verse; which is beyond question hazy. No writer who had the sense of literary form, or consideration for his reader, which Browning never has,

would have left it as it is—a clot of words. It appears to mean this: Feelings of the Right and Good, and Infinite inevitably intrude themselves upon us; in the morning of life, as soon as we begin to think, they do so, and we are obliged to attend to them and deal with them. It is through our attempts to deal with them that we first become alive to the limits of our mind: and when we have become really alive to this we abate our pretentions. We no longer try to fathom the Right, and Good, and Infinite—wrest from these vast emotions their secret; discovering them to be unfathomable we bring them under a general concept, that is, give them a name, and are content. For when a thing is named it is in the philosophical sense known. "To name, that is to know,"* says Max Müller, speaking not for himself only, but for others. And as "named"—Browning seems to say further—*i.e.*, as known, it is known only to him who gave it the name. Not to another; the true knowledge of it is personal to himself—"As thou callest thy hand thine own." He acquired it of himself; he possesses it by himself; he uses it for himself—to further his own ends; and a stranger may not intermeddle with it. Be it what it may to others it is to him at least,

"Knowledge absolute,
Subject to no dispute
From fools that crowded youth, nor let thee
feel alone."

* "Science of Thought."

He is now out of the arena of intellectual strife, whether with himself or with others, and is glad to be out of it. But he has won something there, which he has carried out along with him—certain general conceptions that are truth for him; and possessing which he can practically live. It is the relativity of knowledge with a vengeance.

In finishing the poem Browning returns to the key upon which he started, to the idea that it is good to grow old. The change from youth to age, he says, is a process of moulding and ripening us, and therefore to be joyfully accepted, not to be regretted. He lays hold of the potter and his wheel, as imagery to aid him in expressing himself. What is the prime, the essential condition of the potter doing his work? It is that his wheel go round, spin fast and continuously. The moment it stops, his work—the moulding of his clay into shapeliness and beauty—also stops. Without its swift whirling he is helpless. So with the Great Potter, the power we darkly name God, He needs the forward rush of time, motion and change, to make, to mould, human beings. In the highest sphere of all, as in the lowest, stagnation means death. And Browning introduces the potter's wheel to show us,

> "Why time spins fast;" (verse xxvi.)

it is for the same reason as the wheel spins fast—that it may be an instrument in turning out the very highest work, a finely-wrought soul. Fools don't know this: they regret the flight of time, they sigh

over it, it turns them into Epicureans; and in the true Epicurean spirit they

"Propound,
When the wine makes its round,
Since life fleets, all is change; the Past
gone, seize to-day."

More than fools and Epicureans feel thus: it is a sentiment native to the heart; all know it, and acquiesce in it, even glorify it as a thing that is beautiful. It breathes through all poetry—this lament over things gone, this longing for the past. We have seen what Moore said; and Matthew Arnold has a line,

"Change that unknits the tranquil strength of men."

Again he asks:

"What wears out the life of mortal men?
'Tis that from change to change their being rolls;
'Tis that repeated shocks, again, again,
Exhaust the energy of strongest souls
And numb the elastic powers."

Ever the days go by, go by; and they cruelly take us with them, from things known and dear.

"Time like an ever rolling stream
Bears all its sons away;
They fly forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day."

Of this wide-spread sentiment, this deeply-rooted emotion, Browning was well aware. 'Tis "the old woe o' the world," he says. But we shouldn't let it be a woe and sink under it; we should turn it into

a gladness and rise upon it, as it is intended we should do.

"To draw one beauty into our heart's core
And keep it changeless! such our claim:
So answered,—Never more.

Simple? Why this is the old woe o' the world;
Tune, to whose rise and fall we live and die.
Rise with it, then! Rejoice that man is hurled
From change to change unceasingly,
His soul's wings never furled!"

("James Lee's Wife.")

We can well afford to rejoice at the change that is going on, because there is something that does not change: beneath the seeming change there is permanence:

"All that is, at all,
Lasts ever, past recall;
Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure:
What entered into thee,
That was, is, and shall be:
Time's wheel runs back or stops: (is a matter of
no consequence) Potter and clay endure."

The clay endures, the clay that has been moulded into a cup for God to slake His thirst at—the man who has been so ennobled by life's discipline that in himself and in his acts he glorifies his Maker, the Eternal Potter. That is the great end of all. An end stated with unsurpassed brevity in the front of the Westminster "Shorter Catechism:"

"What is the chief end of man?

Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever."

This being so we need have no fear of growing old, we may light heartedly ask:

> "What though the earlier grooves
> Which ran the laughing loves
> Around thy base, no longer pause and press?
> What though about thy rim,
> Scull things in order grim
> Grow out in graver mood, obey the sterner stress?
>
> . . . .
>
> Look not thou down but up!
> To uses of a cup.
> The festal board, lamp's flash and trumpet's peal,
> The new wine's foaming flow,
> The Master's lips aglow!
> Thou, heaven's consummate cup, what need'st
> Thou with earth's wheel?"

The image is a little odd, but we understand its meaning.

> "Grow old along with me!"

Yes, Rabbi! but upon one imperative condition, that we are members of a civilized community, not of a savage horde. In the latter the old man, as we have seen, is looked upon as a supernumerary and encumbrance. The food supply is always precarious; and when an individual cannot do his share of the necessary hunting he loses all claim to support. He is left behind upon the trail to live or die as he may. Or,

as among the Tchuktchis, mercy steps in and he is violently dispatched. In any case, the swiftness having left his feet and the cunning his hand, he is of use no more ; in the natural order he has become the portion of death. Why should he live? As Dr. Brown says of his great hero Rab : "His friends and his teeth gone, why should he keep the peace and be civil?"

But amid happier economic conditions, where a morsel more or less food matters not, and where people eat not only to hunt but to think, old age may well be the best part of existence. It may have great lessons for us that neither youth nor middle age can teach. Believing that it has, the ancient Aryans in their declining years retired to the forest to meditate, and became "Forest Sages." Some truth from above, or from within, would break upon them there, they felt. It may yet become the same in the West. Some day it may be said among us, that of all the great blessings which civilization confers, it confers none greater than old age—the preservation of the old in their ripeness of wisdom.

St. John asks, ("A death in the Desert :").

> "Is it for nothing we grow old and weak,
> We whom God loves?"

It is not for nothing. Years assist the spirit, they wear thin the thickness of the fleshly veil, and man,

> "Lies bare to the universal prick of light."

Wherefore, when old age comes let us fear not to give it hospitable greeting.

> "Old age, calm, expanded, broad with the haughty
>   breadth of the universe.
> Old age, flowing free with the delicious near-by
>   freedom of death."

VIII.

BROWNING'S STYLE.

A DISTINGUISHED literary critic, Hazlitt, has said of a distinguished philosopher, Bentham, "He writes a language of his own that darkens knowledge. His works have been translated into French—they ought to be translated into English."

It is powerfully if sarcastically stated; and it is what many persons feel about Browning, and what, did they possess Hazlitt's gift of speech, they would say; they would declare that his poems ought to be translated into English. For whithersoever Browning's name has gone, into the scholar's study or the artisan's kitchen, the reputation for obscurity has gone along with it; he has almost become a synonym for obscurity. It is felt that his writings are only for the few, for those who have got brains, and whose brains have been strengthened and made flexible by culture. He deals with the high wisdom that is not for common folk; and his manner of dealing with it is not for common folk either. Wherefore common folk take the hint and leave it alone. Which probably

they experience no self-sacrifice in doing; for we listen readily to the voice that calls us from effort, and that justifies us in taking our ease. You recollect the lovable, simple-minded Gilead P. Beck, who as he threw Browning's works into the fire wished he could put the poet there too. He is representative of a well defined class in their feeling towards Browning; regarding him as a prig and dilettante they pass him by.

Coleridge says justly, "A poem is not necessarily obscure, because it does not aim to be popular. It is enough if a work be perspicuous to those for whom it is written, and

"Fit audience find, though few."

This is in reference to Wordsworth's "Ode on Immortality;" which was intended, proceeds Coleridge, "for such readers only as had been accustomed to watch the flux and reflux of their inmost nature, to venture at times into the twilight realms of consciousness, and to feel a deep interest in modes of inmost being to which they know that the attributes of time and space are inapplicable and alien, but which yet cannot be conveyed, save in symbols of time and space."

We agree, even although it is a tremendous looking proposition that we agree to. As there is genius for the multitude, the common heart of humanity, why should there not be genius also for the few, the peculiar people whom we style learned? Learning changes the palate of the mind, as a long course of the

gourmand's table changes the physical palate. Whether the change is more advantageous in the one case than in the other might be made a question; we suffer distinct loss when we outgrow the great natural emotions, whether it be through the acquisition of culture or through a career in excess. Happy they who keep through life their virgin instincts—the child's heart, the simple mind, the elemental affections of humanity.

But learning does give new interests, and it is supposed in addition to correct, *i.e.*, to elevate the taste; so that learned people's approbation of a writer should be a certificate of merit to him. He proves himself to be somebody when he wins their praise. But this praise Browning did not succeed in winning at the beginning of his career, or even for long after; if he has won it yet. True, one man of genius, Rossetti the painter, in his youthful enthusiasm copied out "Pauline," that he might have it beside him; a companion and guide, a voice that would ennoble and cheer. So profoundly had the poem affected him. There were a few others similarly impressed. But the world of culture as a whole was not impressed. We find Tennyson, *e.g.*, saying that he had read "Sordello" through, and there were only two lines of it he understood; both of which lines were lies. They were the opening and the closing lines:

> "Who will may hear Sordello's story told,"

and,

> "Who would has heard Sordello's story told."

All between was for the Laureate darkness and chaos. Mrs. Carlyle had also the stiff-necked courage to go through the poem, and she couldn't make out, she said, "whether Sordello was a man, or a city, or a book."

Speaking about Tennyson reminds me of a letter (published in his biography) Jowett wrote to him giving his feeling about Browning. Jowett was one of the master-minds of his century, a scholar and a thinker, and with a gift, which scholars and thinkers don't always possess, of writing facile English. He appears not to have found Browning's English facile, or even clear and intelligible; while praising him as a man, he condemns him as a poet:

> "Browning spent a few days with me at commemoration. He is a very extraordinary man, very generous and truthful, and quite incapable of correcting his literary faults, which at first sprang from carelessness, and an uncritical habit, and now are born and bred in him. He has no form, or has it only by accident, when the subject is limited. His thought and feeling, and knowledge are generally out of all proportion to his powers of expression. Since I have been ill I have been reading a good deal of his poems, and have come to like him and in some measure understand him."

This was written in 1887, when Jowett and Browning were both old men; more than half a century after the latter had published his perhaps finest work, "Paracelsus." During all those years the poems had been coming out, had been written about, and enthusiastically talked about, by a few; yet one of the first

intellects of his day had not found it either his interest or his pleasure to read them. Only in his age and infirmity, when he has nothing better upon his hands, he turns to them. "There is something rotten in the state of Denmark."

Enthusiastic Browningites would doubtless admit this; but the rottenness, they would say, was in the scholar, in Jowett and those who felt with him, not in their poet. Browning suffered just as Wordsworth had suffered a generation before him—being an original mind he had to create the taste by which he was appreciated. And to create this it took him the most of his life. Doubtless there is something in it. The public, which Dr. Chalmers once impatiently called "a great baby," is in literary matters, as in religious ones, conservative. Neither of these things puts money into its pocket, and it does not think about them; so that when a new voice in literature speaks it is, so far as the public is concerned, a voice crying in the wilderness:

"When the true poet comes, how shall we know him—
By what dear token,—manners, language, dress?
Or shall a voice from Heaven speak and show him:
Him the swift healer of the Earth's distress!
Tell us, that when the long expected comes
At last, with mirth and melody and singing,
We him may greet with banners, beat of drums,
Welcome of men and maids, and joy-bells ringing
And for this poet of ours,
Laurels and flowers."

"Thus shall ye know him—this shall be his token;
Manners like other men, an unstrange gear;
His speech not musical, but harsh and broken
Shall sound at first, each line a driven spear;
For he shall sing as in the centuries olden,
Before mankind its earliest fire forgot;
Yet whoso listens long hears music golden.
How shall ye know him? Ye shall know him not
Till ended hate and scorn,
To the grave he's borne."*

I know not whom the writer was thinking of when he penned these lines, or whether he was thinking of any one in particular; but they apply well to Browning; whose verse has the characteristics, and who himself had something of the fortune, pictured here. His speech was not musical, so that for long years he sang almost unheeded; or like the bird on the tree that whistles to cheer his mate. For his mate, his wife, did listen. And was cheered too, as the female bird is, presumably, when she hears her lord's song. Browning's song, "that harsh and broken speech" of his, was the divinest thing in all this world to her, a true apocalyptic voice, as "of many angels." It thrilled and satisfied her soul. And being herself thrilled, she was able to give back an impulse that was new life and hope to him. It was beautiful: and when we think of it we overlook their perhaps too fond adulation of each other; their too much patting on the back—he of her, she of him. Like Mahomet

*R. W. Gilder. The Century Magazine, November, 1881.

and Kadijah! "He never forgot this good Kadijah," says Carlyle. "Long afterwards, Ayesha, his young favourite wife, a woman who indeed distinguished herself among the Moslem, by all manner of qualities, through her whole life long; this young brilliant Ayesha was one day questioning him: "Now am not I better than Kadijah? She was a widow; old, and had lost her looks: you love me better than you did her?" "No, by Allah! She believed in me when none else would believe. In the whole world I had but one friend, and she was that." *

I know not whether the Brownings were readers of Carlyle; but supposing they were, we can fancy these words—if they remembered them at the right time, while Browning was still neglected—going to their hearts. She was his Kadijah, she believed in him when few else would believe. In her principal poem, "Aurora Leigh," there is at least one passage that may be taken as an apology for her husband:

"Whosoever writes good poetry,
Looks just to art. He does not write for you
Or me,—for London or for Edinburgh;
He will not suffer the best critic known
To step into his sunshine of free thought
And self-absorbed conception and exact
An inch-long swerving of the holy lines.

* "Lectures on Heroes."

If virtue done for popularity
Defiles like vice, can art, for praise or hire,
Still keep its splendour and remain pure art?
Eschew such serfdom. What the poet writes,
He writes; mankind accepts it if it suits,
And that's success: if not, the poem's passed
From hand to hand, and yet from hand to hand,
Until the unborn snatch it, crying out
In pity on their fathers being so dull,
And that's success too."

I am not sure that this is altogether true. Whoever would write good poetry may have one eye on art if he likes, but he must have the other eye on human nature. As he writes he must think of the reader, and must so put his thoughts that the reader will not only understand, but be induced to follow on, bewitched by the joy and instruction he is receiving. Not only does Browning fail to do this, but he has not an idea of doing it. He allows his subject too much domination over him, and in treating it is more like a man talking to himself than a man talking to others. At the best it is but a small coterie, two or three who are in his secret, he appears to be speaking to; and there are times when even they must find it hard to follow him. He becomes altogether fragmentary, jerking out a word here and a phrase there, for all the world like a person in his sleep. And not only does he write in this way, of set purpose apparently, he has defended himself for doing so; for instance, in "Sordello":

"Leave the mere rude
Explicit details! 'Tis but brother's speech
We need, speech where an accent's change gives
each
The other's soul—no speech to understand
By former audience: need was then to expand,
Expatiate—hardly were we brothers!"

It is this "brother's speech" that has done much of the mischief. He has not only made use of it too often, he has subjected himself to it, as to a literary ideal, and in doing so has become its victim. There were not many of his contemporaries who could be brothers in intellect to Browning, men standing on the same plane, equal in their natural ability, and equal in their acquired knowledge. He had such gifts as are given to but few. And such opportunities of cultivating these gifts as fall to but few also. These things he ought to have considered. There is some reason to think that he did consider them, perhaps too much, but not in the right way, not wisely but too well. Let me be frank: Browning was a man, I do think, who possessed what I have referred to in a former lecture as the egotism of genius; which is so necessary to genius if it would do its work. An altogether proper and admirable quality. But it is a perilous quality, requiring to be carefully kept in hand, to be watched even as a man watches his heart. Left to itself, to take its own way, it may degenerate into the vanity of genius, which is a base thing. This may as easily wreck its possessor as the other keeps him

afloat and bears him along. Reading Browning I have sometimes had a painful feeling of this vanity peeping out in his pages, with a certain affectation for companion. As was to be expected. For these two, vanity and affectation, are a pair; they run together in harness, when we catch sight of the one we may look out for the other. In this view of Browning I hope that I am altogether wrong, that my suspicion is unwarranted and false. But it exists, and I did not consciously call it into being; it came of itself, quietly, gradually, and had established itself in my mind before I was aware. It is one of the things that has kept me from a whole-hearted devotion to Browning; and from joining my voice to the chorus of his idolaters. Certain it is that he could have expressed himself better—with all the charm, with all the strength and beauty, of simplicity if he had seriously tried. In his case it was not, "I can't" but "I won't;' but whether it was "I won't" in sheer carelessness, failure to perceive the importance of the matter, or "I won't" out of deliberate mannerism, is not clear. There was possibly a little of both elements present. Unintelligibility keeps up a writer's reputation for wisdom; a fact known to the ancient oracles, who accordingly took care always to shroud their responses in mystery. It was a fact known also to Browning, who has said:—

"Men believe
And worship what they know not, nor receive
Delight from."

Some men do. And often the weaker and duller they are they do this the more; feeling that it gives them a distinction; which accounts for many a weak brother, and weak sister also, being found among Browning's admirers. An already quoted critic, Hazlitt, has not thought it beneath him to give a passing word to this class of persons. He designates them "the Occult School—*veri adepti*." "They discern no beauties but what are concealed from superficial eyes, and overlook all that are obvious to the vulgar part of mankind. Their art is the transmutation of styles. By a happy alchemy of mind they convert dross into gold—and gold into tinsel. They see farther into a millstone than most others. If an author is utterly unreadable they can read him for ever: his intricacies are their delight, his mysteries are their study."

And Hazlitt has the charity not to ascribe this perversity of taste to affectation. It is "a natural proneness to singularity, a love of what is odd and out of the way. They must come at their pleasures with difficulty, and support admiration by an uneasy sense of ridicule and opposition. They despise those qualities in a work which are cheap and obvious. They like a monopoly of taste, and are shocked at the prostitution of intellect implied in popular productions. In like manner they would choose a friend or recommend a mistress for gross defects; and tolerate the sweetness of an actress's voice only for the ugliness of her face. Pure pleasures are in their judgment stale and insipid:—

"An ounce of sour is worth a pound of sweet!"[1]

We have seen that Jowett attributes Browning's faults of style to carelessness; which in due time avenged itself upon the poet, for it became an ineradicable habit. He as naturally dropped into it when he wrote as his great contemporary, Tennyson, dropped into the opposite, artistic vigilance and effort. He appears to have been aware of this, and aware of it from the first; in "Pauline," for instance, published when he was twenty one, he confesses it:—

"So, I will sing on fast as fancies come;
Rudely, the verse being as the mood it paints."

Again:

"Thou knowest, dear, I could not think all calm,
For fancies followed thought and bore me off,
And left all indistinct; ere one was caught
Another glanced; so, dazzled by my wealth,
I knew not which to leave nor which to choose,
For all so floated, nought was fixed and firm."

Also this:

"Thoughts swarming through the myriad-chambered brain
Like multitudes of bees i' the innumerous cells,
Each staggering 'neath the undelivered freight—"

In these lines there is portrayed a mind of a very marked character—a full mind, and a mind agitated by the sense of its fulness; heaving with the passion to get itself expressed; in a mortal hurry to find words, lest not finding them it should choke.

[1] Essay on Criticism."

This is Browning's mind; and it is these essential qualities of it—fulness and vehemence—that are the great source of his uncouth style. Had he had less to say, and had he taken more time to say it, he might have been as limpid clear as any poet among them. He had brain-power to enable him to be such. This is at once a eulogy and a criticism, praise and condemnation in the same breath. But it seems to meet Browning's excellencies and defects exactly. A full mind! Browning certainly had that, the fullest mind probably of any literary man in his generation. And full of the right stuff. Such a mind, Bacon says, comes from reading; but I am not sure that in all cases it does. At least that rich quality of fulness which enables a man to be a teacher, whose words give illumination and life, does not necessarily come. Thousands who read are "Dominie Sampsons," their reading only loads their memories with inert matter, which is more a hindrance to them than a help. A French writer (Chateaubriand) says, "Memory is frequently a characteristic of stupidity. It belongs generally to heavy minds, which it renders heavier still by the baggage with which it loads them." A striking generalisation; and like most striking generalisations not, at the best, more that half true. Yet containing one distinct truth; for the reading that does no more that fill our memory fails of its great end. Which end is to awaken the sleeping powers of the soul, especially those magic powers, thought and imagination; powers that exercised put us into

possession of ourselves, make us men and masters of our fate. Till we begin to think, and dream of things beyond our thinking, floating as in a haze, formless, we are children or slaves.

The stuff that was in Browning's mind, filling it till it became uneasy from its fulness, was not mere unassimilated fact; not raw material he had picked out of this or that book, or seen among men as he strode along. It was fact transmuted and made alive by the alchemy of his thought—the poet's thought; which out of common things can draw an elixir for the spirit, as out of the common flower the bee draws honey.

A great reader was Browning, a keen and wide observer, an unwearied explorer of life in its many paths and by-paths; and a true and vital thinker, dreamer, upon all he in this way learned. His gathered knowledge was not allowed to lie in his mind dormant, like corn in a granary, or dry goods in a box. Rather like corn put into the earth, which through death comes to newness of life, this knowledge dying produced higher knowledge still; knowledge with something of a human soul, of Browning's soul, added. This made it better than knowledge, something spiritual, and meet for the human spirit to feed upon. In this respect Browning was not singular as a poet; it is what the man of genius always does with the facts of life—wheresoever he finds them, in books, or in the world about him as he takes his way through it. By the witchery

of his imagination he touches them into beauty; so that we not only become reconciled to them, but find in the contemplation of them joy.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's fancy turns out actually true: "After all his other works," says Hawthorne, "God created the poet to give the last finishing touch to his world, and make it habitable to man." Without the light which the poet sheds upon it, it is not habitable to man. Brute beasts and savages may dwell upon it, without feeling themselves exiles, but the civilized human being with his finely wrought susceptibilities cannot. He requires religion or poetry, or both, to gild it and give it the aspect of a home. Even Bacon with his mighty intellect felt the shock of naked fact, of the real as it presents itself in history, too much for him. There is that in man, he says, which requires something more than the real for its satisfaction and development; and if he cannot find this something in actual life, so great is his need that he must feign it. It is a remarkable testimony to the infinite of our nature; and from an intellect wholly unwarped by emotion, as calm and clear as it is strong.

The passage where he says this is in his "Advancement of Learning," and as follows. After defining "*poesy*" as "nothing else but *feigned history*," he continues:

"The use of this *feigned history* hath been to give some shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny

it, the world being in proportion inferior to the soul; by reason whereof there is, agreeable to the spirit of man, a more ample greatness, a more exact goodness, and a more absolute variety than can be found in the nature of things. Therefore, because the acts or events of *true history* have not that magnitude which satisfieth the mind of man, *poesy* feigneth acts greater and more heroical; because *true history* propoundeth the successes and issues of actions not so agreeable to the merits of virtue and vice, therefore *poesy* feigns them more just in retribution, and more according to revealed providence: because true history representeth actions and events more ordinary, and less interchanged, therefore *poesy* endueth them with more rareness, and more unexpected and alternative variations: so as it appeareth that *poesy* serveth and conferreth to magnanimity, morality, and to delectation. And therefore it was ever thought to have some participation of divineness, because it doth raise and erect the mind, by submitting the shows of things to the desires of the mind; whereas reason doth buckle and bow the mind into the nature of things. And we see, that by these insinuations and congruities with man's nature and pleasure, joined also with the agreement and consort it hath with music, it hath had access and estimation in rude times and barbarous regions, where other learning stood excluded."

No profounder, juster exposition of poetry could be found; and none is more worthy of consideration. It

implies nearly everything that was said in my first lecture upon this divine art. It is the elevation of poetry, by a cold, clear intellect, to the first rank among human activities. Take it out of the world and you deplete the world of what makes it a fit dwelling-place for man, where his soul can not only exist, but live and grow, as the soul's Maker intended. Poetry provides for it a bread of life.

Addison has a kindred sentiment. It is in one of a series of papers upon "The Pleasures of the Imagination," written by him for the *Spectator* of June, 1712. Bacon was running in his mind at the time, for he refers to him ; and it was Bacon, doubtless, that suggested this sentiment. It is of "feigned" Nature, however, rather than of "feigned" history that Addison writes :

> "Because the mind of man requires something more perfect in matter, than what it finds there, and can never meet with any sight in nature which sufficiently answers its highest idea of pleasantness ; . . . on this account it is the part of a poet to humour the imagination in its own notions, by mending and perfecting nature where he describes a reality, and by adding greater beauties than are put together in nature where he describes a picture."

The testimony of these men of genius is not flattering to the world, which apparently is so grim that it needs the hues of fancy thrown over it to make it fit for our contemplation—a thing we can look at and not

shudder. Is their testimony correct? It probably is. And it gives us the strongest, most unanswerable reasons for thanking God that he has created the poet.

I have said that Browning had not only a full mind, the fullest, probably, among men of letters of his time, he had a mind eager for expression, burning with the desire to get out what was in it. He was in a terrible hurry, he did not take time. And this not because he would not take time, so much as because he could not do it. An inward necessity drove him on. It is in the psychological facts of his consciousness that we must look for the secret of Browning's style. And we find it there. Because there was so much of him —such strength, such exuberance, such a teeming brain, such internal movement—he could not write with deliberation. He tumbled out pell-mell what was in him, rather than let it out gravely and in order. It is this quality that Swinburne dwells upon in his introduction to Chapman's Homer, where he defends Browning against the charge of obscurity. He is not obscure, says this writer, who dearly loves to be of the opposition. "He is something too much the reverse; he is too brilliant and subtle for the ready reader of a ready writer to follow with any certainty the track of an intelligence which moves with such incessant rapidity, or even to realize with what spider-like swiftness and sagacity his building spirit leaps and lightens to and fro and backward and forward as it lives along the animated line of its labour, springs from thread

to thread and darts from centre to circumference of the glittering and quivering web of living thought woven from the inexhaustible stores of his perception and kindled from the inexhaustible fires of his imagination. (What the consequence of kindling a web would be he does not say). He never thinks but at full speed; and the rate of his thought is to that of another man's as the speed of a railway to that of a waggon or the speed of a telegraph to that of a railway."

It is quite true. And Mr. Swinburne tells it at full speed also; so that the reader must have his loins girt up to keep abreast of him. The rapid movement is visible in every page of Browning's that he has written, in every sentence he has constructed. As a squirrel among the branches he is among the incidents, the ideas, that he handles, there is no limit to his agility. And we blame him not for it. We praise him rather. It is a fine feat of intellect, and to be admired as such; as we admire displays of swordsmanship, horsemanship, athletics and the like. Where is the good of genius if it is not allowed to exhibit itself—to gambol at its pleasure and show its superiority? The strong man rejoices in his strength, why not the strong brain also in its strength, in the fire, the brightness, the lightness, and the elasticity that distinguish it?

Swinburne goes on, and about the reading of Browning gives excellent advice. He must not be taken up at any time or every time, says Swinburne, as we take

up a novel from the library. We must be in the fit mood of mind. And the fit mood is "the freshest, clearest, most active mood, when the mind is in its brightest, and keenest hours of work." With most persons such hours are in the fore-part of the day, before the day's work has tired them, had its pound of flesh out of them, and they think only of rest. But this is to say, practically, that Browning is a writer only for the few, for professional students or the idle rich, who are not engaged in business occupations. There is no factory or counting house claiming them every morning, and keeping them at work till the evening sets in; which is the lot of all who are engaged in the industries of life. And when the evening with its rest does come to such men what sort of literature are they fit for? They have the wish to improve their minds—let us take that for granted. Money-making, they feel, is all very well, is a strenuous necessity that must be engaged in—but it is by no means everything. They have heard say, that there is something in man which cannot live by bread alone, and they feel this something in themselves. They would like to respect it, to reverence it, to do it justice. So they provide themselves with books: they take to reading as a duty, even to reading the higher literature, that this something in them may have the wherewithal to live by. Suppose that among other books they take up a volume of Browning; and suppose that they open this volume at "Sordello" or "Fifine at the Fair."—"what will they think? How

will they act? Will they think, like Douglas Jerrold when he first tackled Browning, that their mind has gone wrong? Or, like the hero of the "Golden Butterfly," will they toss the volume into the fire, and wish they could put the poet there too? I know not. I shall risk the assertion, however, that they will not be encouraged to go on. For ordinary human nature Browning is too much almost at any time, but at the end of a day's work he is impossible. This is wholly owing to his style. It is not his depth, his originality, his learning that render him unintelligible, as his idolaters aver; it is an altogether unpardonable fault, and one he could have avoided had he chosen. It is the ill-ordered, unwieldy, long-backed, often broken-backed sentences in which he indulges. When out of breath we arrive at the end of these sentences, we have frequently forgotten the beginning. And there is more than these long-backed, ugly, parenthetical sentences: to get his lines the proper length, and his rythm all right he has an inveterate habit of leaving out his pronouns. And the punctuation is unique; invented by himself, for himself, and happily not yet imitated, so far as I know, by other writers of English. For marks of interrogation he has nothing short of a passion, they lie as thick upon his pages as if they had been shaken out of a pepper-box. He simply will not make a positive statement if he can wriggle out his idea by asking a question. All this to a beginner is bewildering. Is it also due to his psychological build, the natural structure of his mind?

Or did it begin by being an affectation, which the long practice of turned into an instinct? If the former, then that self-criticism an author should engage in would have shown him its awkwardness, and would have induced him, out of regard for his public, to correct it. But Browning never did regard his public, as I have said. He habitually treated it with indifference, as if it was a negative quantity, or with scarce veiled contempt, as if it was worse. I am an Olympian, he appears to feel; the mark of the God is upon me; and stride along as clumsily as I like the rabble-rout seeing this mark will follow me. The rabble-rout did nothing of the kind. The rabble-rout have left him severely alone, paying him back with just that indifference he first paid to them. It is not only proper of them, it is wise; and in the interests of literature it is to be commended. Schopenhauer says truly: "Just as neglect of dress betrays contempt for the society in which a man moves, so does a hasty, careless and bad style show shocking disrespect for the reader, who then rightly punishes it by not reading the book." This is bluntly and courageously put, as by one who thinks less about politeness than about speaking the truth; and all lovers of art in literature will thank him for it. And for many other good things of a like kind that he says in his short essay upon "Authorship and Style." A pity but Browning could have laid to heart the teachings of that essay before he began to write; it might have been a God-send to him, and to the "British Public" also:

"God love ye, whom I yet have laboured for."

Here, for instance, is one truth from that essay which Browning was in need of pondering: "Those writers who construct difficult, obscure, involved and ambiguous phrases most certainly do not rightly know what it is they wish to say; they have only a dull consciousness of it, which is still struggling to put itself into thought." Now, dull consciousness is this kind of thing, it requires time to precipitate itself and become crystallized—out of formlessness to take form and be ready for expression, as the seed must be a certain period in the husk before it is formed and ripe. And as anything unduly forced into birth instead of being a thing of beauty, shapely and well proportioned, is an abortion. In all her spheres, from the amœba to the man, Nature ever takes time, she refuses to be hurried. And man is a part of Nature; wherefore if he would produce anything worth producing he must follow Nature's example, and be gradual. "A real work of art," says a writer, "can only arise in the soul of an artist occasionally, as the fruit of the life he has lived, just as a child is conceived by its mother. But counterfeit art is produced by artisans and handicraftsmen continually, if only consumers can be found." It is even so. How often do we see writers of genius who persist in writing a great deal, yet withal producing only one or two good books. All their others are a revised version of these one or two; which if we read we get their whole message to the world, all of truth that the Supreme Powers had en-

trusted to them to reveal. And I cannot but think it a pity that they should go on writing after they have given this message. But it is so rough a world, with so many sharp-edged necessities in it, that no man, not even the genius, can devote himself wholly to the ideal. For the artist, even as the artisan, must live. He too has got a stomach, which cries out for the loaves and fishes, and magician though he be, he cannot stifle this cry. So he keeps his pen, or his brush, or whatever implement he works with, busy; not that he may give artistic expression to himself, but that he may produce marketable commodities. We may wish it were otherwise; but knowing the stern warfare of life, and that even the strong may not do as they like, but only as they can, we blame no one. Is not life at the best but the best of a bad job?

But Browning had not the excuse of necessity for producing so rapidly and abundantly as he did. The fulness of his mind accounts for his doing so to a considerable extent; and so far as it does this we forgive him. We understand and sympathize; knowing that when the thought is within, alive and pulsating, not to get it out is pain. Expression is the artist's deepest need.

But there was something in addition to this need that accounts for the copiousness of Browning. In lengthiness, not to say long-windedness, he stands among modern poets almost alone. The reason is, as indicated, he had so very much to say—so many ideas, such gathered knowledge, such wealth of fancy

and speculation. When he began to write it was like the letting-out of waters, wave after wave of thought rushed forward, beating at the sluice-gate for exit.

And they too much prevailed, he let out too much: he lacked a faculty that in all true artists stands prominent, the faculty of selection. This faculty helps the poet or painter both negatively and positively; negatively by preventing him seeing too much, positively by guiding him to the right parts—the parts that are suggestive, that tell the story better than the whole with all its details could do. "Le secret pour étre ennuyeux, c'est de tout dire"—the secret of being wearisome is to tell everything. And Browning, unfortunately for himself, and also for his readers, does possess this secret. He crowds his pages with details, as if instead of writing a poem, something to stimulate the imagination, he were drawing up an inventory. It shows the richness of his mind, especially his powers of observation, which would have fitted him to be a man of science if he had desired. But it injured him as a poet.

In this respect Walt Whitman was the same, and knew it, and defended himself in the practice of it. He says: "The old poets went on the assumption that there was a selection needed. I make little or no selection, put in common things, tools, trades, all that happens or belongs to mechanics, farmers, or the practical community." But on another occasion he said, that poetry as he had written it was purely an experiment, and he could not be certain that it would

succeed. Speaking for myself, Whitman's details do not weary me, somehow, as Browning's do; probably just because they are common-place, as the palate feels a savour in common victuals far longer than in dainties.

Browning, I understand, has a great reputation for his power of rhyming, in which he himself took a special pride. There was no jaw-breaking word in the English language, or in any other, that he could not match in sound with some other word, or combination of words, even though he had to manufacture such. A feat not so difficult if we throw sense and elegance to the winds, as Browning, when there was the need, bravely would. Consequently he has perpetrated some of the most barbarous rhymes in literature—rhymes which, could they be preserved in no other way, should be put into a museum. And rhymes which add to his obscurity; for the sense has often to accommodate itself to the rhyming word, not the rhyming word to the sense. What monstrosity, for instance, have we got here? What original poetry is this?

> "One is incisive corrosive;
> Two retorts, nettled, curt, crepitant;
> Three makes rejoinder, expansive, explosive;
> Four overbears them all, strident and strepitant;
> Five . . . O Danaides, O Sieve!"

And this:

> "Jane Lamb, that we danced with at Vichy!
> What, is not she Jane? Then who is she?"

There is plenty more similar, or worse, if I could recollect it; stuff good enough for a smoke-room when the wit is flowing; not good enough for a place in the same volume with "Abt Vogler" and "A Death in the Desert." Browning lacked the sense that saves us from the ludicrous.

Notwithstanding all this he often attains to music in his poems, and to a higher class music than the melody of the lyric. Being no musician myself, however, I would speak here subject to correction. But "A Grammarian's Funeral" has struck me by its qualities in this respect, and so has "Abt Vogler." So also the "Epilogue" to "Ferishtah's Fancies," and more particularly still, perhaps, that to the first book of "The Ring and The Book,"

"O lyric Love, half angel and half bird:"

which was once described to me as, "Pure drunkenness of pretty words;" as it very nearly is. But not quite; it has a meaning, it does say something; and with patience you will discover what the something is.

About Browning's style there is this strange thing to be said, it is sometimes as admirable as at other times it is abominable; sometimes the perfection of unadorned strength—calm, unencumbered, athletic and beautiful, like a Greek statue. Like the sleeves of one of George Eliot's heroines, which "were not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters." Because Browning at his best has no style, in the conventional

sense of that term, he has the perfection of style; he has fully graduated; he knows how to put it; he is a master in the art of literary expression. They who have a weakness for what is called flowery language should particularly study him. He will help them if they can be helped. He will show them—by contrast—how vulgar a thing ornament is, in a book's page as on a woman's person; and that in literature there is no majesty greater than the majesty of our strong English speech in its nakedness.

But Browning at his best makes us all the more impatient of Browning at his worst. He could, and yet he would not, there is his offence. That he could is shown in the short poem, "Andrea Del Sarto," for instance; which is as strong as anything he ever wrote, yet softly beautiful and clear. It is shown also in many parts of "The Ring and The Book," in "Paracelsus," and in numerous others. There is a well known passage in the last named that is special in its grandeur, equal, perhaps, to any utterance of poetic—rather prophetic—genius on record. Every person who knows anything of Browning knows the passage; nevertheless, I shall quote it.

> "I go to prove my soul!
> I see my way as birds their trackless way.
> I shall arrive! what time, what circuit first
> I ask not: but unless God can send his hail
> Or blinding fire balls, sleet or stifling snow,
> In some good time, his good time, I shall arrive!
> He guides me and the bird."

And for tenderness take the opening lines in part III. of "The Ring and The Book;" heart melting lines, with the sweetness of childhood in them and the strength of manhood—simple, pathetic:

> "Another day that finds her living yet,
> Little Pompilia with the patient brow
> And lamentable smile on those poor lips,
> And under the white hospital-array
> A flower-like body, to frighten at a bruise
> You'd think, yet now, stabbed through and through again,
> Alive in the ruins."

The man who wrote these, and other similar lines, need never have been charged with obscurity had he chosen to take care. He might have been clear all through, to readers at least who will use their minds, and yet have kept his idiosyncrasy; a thing always worth keeping in a man of marked character like him. I would rather have Browning rough and ready as he is, with his idiosyncrasy retained, than have him smooth like the others with his idiosyncrasy away. After all there is something ethical in style, something that comes from a writer's core, and is an index to his character; a kind of carte-de-visite of him, as the dying Champollion said his M.S. was of him. If there is not something ethical, psychological, the style is not original but a copy; not real literature, therefore, not art, and not worth serious attention. "All original art," says Taine, "is self-

regulated, and no original art can be regulated from without; it carries its own counter-poise and does not receive it from elsewhere—lives on its own blood."

To require that the man of genius express himself after a given pattern is as stupid as harmful. It shows ignorance in the critic, and it does injury to literature — robbing it of originality, power, picturesqueness, variety, and a thousand qualities that charm. In all great art there must ever be something of nature; which is but to say that there must ever be something of life. That is the magician that works the miracles, that is the secret of all true power, the poet's power included. Where it is not no great thought is shaped, no puissant words come, we are not affected, there is no change, no masterly creation, all things remain as they were before. And strong, self-reliant life always takes its own way, chooses its own aim, makes rules for itself, as the rivers make their own channels. If we imposed upon the soul a law by which to utter itself, we would stop its evolution; as they did in the past when they imposed upon it a law by which to think. Thought and the expression of thought are vitally related. Are they not at bottom one? The thought makes the style, as truly and naturally as the soul makes the body.

> "Soul is form and doth the body make."

"It is not metre," says Emerson, "but a metre making argument that makes a poem—a thought so

passionate and alive, that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing."

All this Browning knew. But he carried the principle of it too far; using the liberty it gave him so freely that he turned it into licence. True art does not destroy, or seek to destroy individuality; but it lays upon it a certain restraint—forbids it to be uncouth, outré, fantastic in its manifestations. Browning might have shown his special qualities in every page that he has penned, yet had every page clear, beautiful and serene, as so many of his pages are. That he did not think of this seems a pity. Had he done so it would have helped him to live. It would have made sure that he will be carried down the stream of time with the poets who are great, perhaps with Shakespeare and Milton. For it is with things immaterial as with things material, with the products of the brain as with the products of the hand, good workmanship lasts longest. Among experts there seems to be a consensus of opinion that it is so. Whatever the matter be there is ever much in the manner. Buckle's celebrated phrase, "It is style that lives," is passing into a proverb. "An artist should get his workmanship as good as he can, and make his work as perfect as possible. A small vessel built on fine lines is likely to float further down the stream of time than a big raft." This was Tennyson's doctrine; and he practised what he preached, so unre-

mittingly that some have called him artist first and poet afterwards. Here is the testimony of another: speaking of the Quakers and their passion for plainness, Bancroft says that, " Penn, who was able to write exceedingly well, too often forgot that style is the gossamer on which the seeds of truth float through the world." It is even so. This gossamer has floated down to us the great thoughts of the Ancients—of Plato and the Tragedians, of Virgil and Lucretius; who were careful not only to think at their best, but to commit their thoughts to the keeping of noble language. So that Addison says, " If a man would know whether he possesses literary taste, I would have him read over the celebrated works of antiquity which have stood the test of so many ages and countries . . . . . If upon the perusal of such writings he does not find himself delighted in an extraordinary manner . . . he ought to conclude, not (as is too usual among tasteless readers) that the author wants those perfections which have been admired in him, but that he himself wants the faculty to discover them."

Words that may be applied to certain readers of Browning; whose failure to discover power and beauty in his works may be caused by some defect in themselves.

How it will fare with this poet in the future I know not. That other great poets will arise is certain; poets that will think as profoundly and feel as nobly as Browning; and that will speak more plainly, with

the rare magic of simple strength. And in the enthusiasm with which they are greeted he may be forgotten. His ruggedness will always operate against him. Still, some future critic may see his way to say of him as Hazlitt said of Cobbett: "He is one of those writers who can never tire us, not even of himself; and the reason is, he is always full of matter."

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L. H